























## LITTLE DOLL

**FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLD** Kathy finds escape from the drabness of home in the noise and gaiety of the local 'caff' and in the excitement of an affair with handsome Johnny, three years her senior. When Kathleen's mother learns that her schoolgirl daughter is pregnant she rejects her in horror; the 'Welfare people' must take over the responsibility. Defiant, frightened, lying desperately to protect Johnny from prosecution, pretty little Kathy becomes the tough 'little doll' who can hand over her baby for immediate adoption. What happens next forms the subject of this thought-provoking study of the turmoil of adolescence.

In a first novel of remarkable depth, racy dialogue and authentic feeling, Pat Garrod exposes the sham conventionality of parents faced with their children's problems.





# Little Doll

A novel by

PAT GARROD



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**To DONALD**

**In fulfilment of a promise**



# I

THAT night began like any other. All I had wanted was to get out of the house. Tina and Jeannette were open-mouthed in front of the telly; and Mum was in the garden, telling Mrs Hall next door that up to three months, yes, you might be able to do something about it, but after that, no. And I was bursting with restlessness.

‘Can I go out, Mum?’

‘Can’t you see I’m talking?’

‘I want to go out! I’ve got nothing to do!’

‘What’s wrong with the telly? You’re never satisfied. Before we had the telly, you couldn’t wait to get one. Why can’t you be like Tina and Jeannette?’

‘They’re kids.’

‘Tina’s thirteen. You’re only fourteen.’

‘Tina will still be a kid when she’s ninety!’

That upset Mum. Tina was Mum’s favourite. Even if Mum had been inclined to weaken about my going out, I had done for myself by that remark. I was so mad, I kicked the clothes prop and made it fall, and Mum then smacked my face hard and said if I behaved like a kid of three she’d treat me like one. She made me pick the prop up.

'I only want to go out for a walk, Mum!'

'What would you do if she was yours, Mrs Hall?'

Mrs Hall laughed.

'Give her a tranquilizer with every meal to settle her.'

'Dynamite wouldn't settle her when she's in one of her moods!'

'Can I go for a walk, Mum?'

'Listen to me, Kathleen Purslowe! The answer to that is no, and it always will be no! The last time you went for a walk, you went straight to that blasted Four Square Caff. You swore you didn't, of course, but lies don't worry you!'

'There's nothing wrong with the Caff!'

'No? All those teddy boys with motor-bikes kicking up hell? All the riff-raff of the neighbourhood getting up to I don't know what? It's a pity your father doesn't take a bit more interest in his family instead of spending every spare minute at the pub! If he'd been anything of a man, he'd have gone up to the Caff and dragged you out by the hair of your head! You can get back inside now. And if you've nothing to do, no homework, and the telly bores you, then you can sling your hook to bed!'

I dare not stay a minute longer or I would have lashed out with the prop. I went straight through the house, out of the front door, up the street and through the turnings to the Four Square Cafe, known to us all as 'The Caff'. I was still mad when I got there, mad enough to feel like smashing the window.

Merle and Susan were leaning on the counter.

'Oh no!' Merle moaned, pretending to writhe in agony at the sight of me.

'We've got competition, girls!' Susan shouted.

I hung an arm round each of their necks and sobbed:

'You make me feel good!'

That was the beauty of the Caff. You could sob, or scream with laughter, or plan suicide, and nobody interfered.

When I had got over my temper, I was rash enough to put my last coin in the juke. The noise was terrific. Merle and Susan

were telling me something, and I couldn't hear it, and I couldn't have cared less. I couldn't have cared less what tune the juke was playing either. I was in the centre of the noise—the screaming, the thumping, the urging—and I was happy. Merle and Susan were part of it, mouthing their words, and I just laughed. This was living. Being at home was dying.

That threepennorth went very quickly. I said to Norman :

'Give the juke a fill-up!'

Norman said : 'I'd rather give you a fill-up!'

Merle said : 'Oo . . . Hark at him!'

Larry Pearce came over. He bought me a coke. We sat at a side table and he stared at me and said he wished I'd listen. I said the only time I listened was when the juke was playing; and he got up and bought me some more noise.

He sat staring across at me as if he could eat me; and I only knew he was talking because his mouth was moving. When the money in the juke ran out, there was such a horrible hush that we all groaned.

'Put some more money in, Larry,' I said.

'I want to talk to you.'

'Talk away, but put the money in first.'

He didn't put the money in.

'I want you to go steady with me, Kathy. I get good money. I've stuck to my job for four years, and I'm working up to be marrager of one of the branches.'

'You've said all this before.'

'Don't you like me?'

'Why should I?'

'I know I'm not good enough for you. You've got brains. You go to a grammar school, and I didn't. But I'm getting on well in the shop, and . . . I'm fond of you, that's it really. I can't get you out of my mind. I want to buy you things. I want to look after you. I want to take you places. You're better looking than any girl I've ever met.'

I said :

'If you've finished, Larry, buy me some noise!'

Johnny Park came in just then and shouted :

'Who's coming to the fair?'

'What fair?' Merle asked.

'Battersea . . . There's a Big Dipper that'll. . . .

Susan poured coke down her throat as if down a sink. We all rushed for the street.

'Johnny!' I screamed. 'Take me on *your* bike!'

'Anybody's welcome to Johnny Park!' Merle said. 'He's as safe as a dead matador!'

Sue got on to Norman's pillion :

'I'd prefer the dead matador. At least he was alive once upon a time!'

Larry caught my arm :

'I'll take you to the fair, Kathy! I've got money to burn. You don't mind, do you, Johnny?'

'Of course I don't.' Johnny Park said.

'Drop dead, Larry Pearce!' I said.

I got on to Johnny's bike. Johnny didn't look exactly pleased. Johnny worshipped Larry.

'What do you want me to do, Larry?' Johnny said.

'What can you do, except look after her? If she wants to go with you, that's it, isn't it? Don't go too fast, and if we don't meet up, take her home early so her old man don't get worried. I like Kathy's old man. I used to see a lot of him when I worked behind the bar in the evenings.'

That made me nearly get off Johnny's bike. I don't know what it was exactly, but I often cried myself to sleep over Dad. He seemed lost. The only bit of excitement in our house was when Dad came home at night, and he never came in until well after closing time. He made me die sometimes; and sometimes he made me cry. . . .

'When you two have finished,' I said, 'perhaps you'll step on it, Johnny.'

Larry put his own crash helmet on my head and he watched me put my arms round Johnny :



'Go on, Johnny! Go faster than sound! Go faster than you've ever been before! Go mad! Kill us!'

Larry put a ten shilling note in Johnny's hand :

'Buy her a thrill from me.'

Once we were away from the Caff, Johnny went fast and I whipped him on. He did go mad. Trees rushed at us. We grazed a wall, and then a lorry. We were on top of a hill and the stars were below.

'Let's get off and look at the stars for a bit,' I said when Johnny had stopped to adjust his chinstrap.

Johnny didn't want to sit on the grass.

'It's late,' he said. 'If we're going to the fair, we ought to turn back.'

'We're not going to the fair,' I said. 'If we do, you'll meet up with Larry Pearce and you'll follow him round like a dog.'

I made him sit beside me. He said his mother would get worried if he was too late, and his father would belt him. I jeered at him :

'Say! Are you seventeen or seven, Johnny Park?'

I wouldn't let him move. I made him hold my hand. I made him tell me my hair was more blonde than any other girl's he had ever known. I wouldn't let him forget me for a single moment. And then I said he'd got to take me for another ride, and all the time I hit his back and screamed and laughed.

I made him stop and tell me the time. It was eleven o'clock. I said it was too late now for me to go home if I didn't want to get murdered by my mother and he'd have to stay out with me. He said he daren't and I jeered at him. I said :

'Go home, little boy, go to your mummie! Larry Pearce wouldn't go home and leave me all night. Larry will be mad at you when he knows. Larry wants me to go steady with him. Shall I go steady with Larry, Johnny? Shall I?'

I lay in the long grass and looked up at the stars. I was so sorry for Johnny, and yet I couldn't leave him alone. It was as if all these things were happening to me without willing on my part.

Johnny walked away.

'Goodbye, Johnny . . . It's been awfully nice knowing you.  
He came back.

'You've got to come back, Kathy! Come on! I can't leave you here, not because of you, but because of Larry.'

He tried to pull me up, but I pulled him down, and I laughed at him and kissed him.

'Now scream for Mummie,' I jeered.

He caught my shoulders and hurt me :

'What do you want?'

'You're hurting!'

'Serves you right! Why don't you leave me alone?'

'I don't know, Johnny . . . I wish I did. I want you to like me, I suppose. Larry likes me, but I don't like him the way I like you. I want you to kiss me, Johnny, and to hold me, and to say things like Larry says, and. . . .'

I made him kiss me several times; and something in his reluctance hurt me.

'What are you worried about, Johnny? There's nothing wrong with kissing, is there? I feel as if there's nothing wrong with liking someone the way I do you, but. . . .'

He lay back, and for a while I left him alone. I lay beside him looking up at the stars, and felt quiet and yet excited.

'Johnny, let's stay like this all night, just once . . . Please . . . I'll never ask you again, truly . . . I just couldn't go back—not because of Mum, but because you're you and I'm me, and there are stars in the sky . . . Johnny . . . Johnny . . . Be fond of me!'

IT was in the summer that I stood at the form-room window, listening to the buzzing of a bluebottle. I shall remember that particular bluebottle all my life because, though I didn't know it then, it was the last time I would ever be in the form-room. Mum came to see the headmistress in the afternoon because I had been sick for several mornings; and Mum said it looked very much to her as if someone had been interfering with me. Of course I denied it. I would have died rather than tell her about Johnny, because what had happened wasn't Johnny's fault. Johnny wasn't made for sinning, although I had made him sin through getting him to like me a lot. I could believe now that Johnny liked me, because he often said: 'This is good!' when we were alone just below the stars, and he didn't want me to go steady with Larry Pearce.

Mum and Miss Hartnell, our headmistress, both went for me, firing question after question.

'I know I ought to take her to a doctor,' Mum said, 'but I'm that ashamed. Now listen, Kathy, we want the truth, and I mean to have the truth if it's the last thing I do. Was it that dirty old devil of a shoe repairer?' I didn't answer, so Mum explained to Miss Hartnell: 'I never trusted that old man. First

he gave Kathy sweets, then it was a shilling, and then it was a puppy! As if I haven't got enough to do without clearing up after a puppy! I made her take it back, and I warned her that if the old man gave her anything else I'd have the police on him.'

I seemed to feel the warmth of the puppy and the pain of having to take him back, the lifting across the narrow counter, the way my fingers wouldn't let go. I could still see the old man as he looked up from his last. He took the dog very gently in his dirty hands, and he gave me a dirty handkerchief to dry my eyes on, and he found me a chocolate bar.

'Tell you what,' he said. 'It can still be your puppy, but I'll look after it for you, shall I? And you can come here every time you're by, and play with him and feed him. . . .'

Mum and Miss Hartnell terrified me. They made what Johnny and I had done together under the stars sound a terrible crime. Mum got me into such a state that I felt as if I had destroyed her, as if the world must suddenly stop and we'd be flung off in all directions.

'The worst element to me, Kathleen,' Miss Hartnell said, 'is the sheer waste of it. You're one of the Teyne Foundation Grammar School's most promising pupils. Your English is a joy, quite beyond the normal even in a school like this where the standard is exceedingly high. *That's* the tragedy to me, because by this . . . act . . . you've set your course, the way of a girl with half your intelligence. Why did you behave in this manner? Hasn't our School given you anything that would have helped you in a crisis like this? Don't you see, Kathleen—your failure is my failure, your act is my act. I feel as if I'm standing where you are. I am to blame.'

Mum was so angry then.

'That's as maybe, Miss Hartnell. I'm certainly not to blame. I've given my children everything. I've worked my fingers to the bone for them so that they can have a home they'll be proud of. We've got everything—a telly, a fridge, the latest spin dryer . . . the lot. I even bought Kathy a bedroom suite of her own

—a single oak bed and a lovely chest of drawers and a wardrobe with a long mirror. It's hers. I told her she can have it when she's married for her spare room . . . No. I certainly won't blame myself for this. I've never kept my girls in ignorance of the world. I've told them it's for a man to ask and for a woman to say no. They know how I go about. Not one of them has seen me undressed, not even their father. I know some married women who behave as if they're . . . well, tarts, but not me. Men don't want encouraging. They want a damper put on them.'

I didn't hear the rest of it. I cried because of Dad. He would mind about me. He would say: 'Kathy! Oh, Kathy!' and it would kill me. And he'd go up to the pub earlier and stay later, and Mum would tell him when he came in that if he was a man or even an apology for a man he'd give me the hiding of my life. Mum did so want Dad to give us hidings. She'd tell him what we'd done and then say: 'Go on! You're her father! You chastise her!' And Dad always looked as if she was handing him her butcher's knife and telling him to finish us off.

'Crying's no good,' Mum said to me. 'The milk's spilt, and you've yet to learn that nothing will get it back into the bottle again. D'you think any decent man's going to marry you now? Oh, he'll muck about with you, true. That's men all over. But the word will go round that Kathleen Purslowe's dead easy. I'm right, aren't I, Miss Hartnell?'

Mum did most of the talking. At times, she worked herself up into such a frenzy that she had to hurt me by pinching my arm and shaking me, by asking a question and putting her face against mine, by pushing me from her so that I landed against the wall. Miss Hartnell kept saying:

'Don't upset yourself so, Mrs Purslowe,' and Mum kept saying:

'I'll never hold up my head again.'

But for me there were only three words in the air, and they stabbed at me so that I cried again and again:

'Kathy! Oh Kathy!'

In my heart I was saying :

'Dad ! I don't know why I did it ! I had to, just as if it wasn't me ! It was the stars, and the speed, and Johnny's fear. They made me do it. Johnny's like you, Dad. He's afraid, too. You go to the pub because when you're drunk you aren't afraid. I'm afraid, too, sometimes. I think I'll come home one day and you'll be gone for ever. I don't want the fridge. Dad, or the telly, or anything but hearing you come in at night, and seeing your smile, and knowing you're not afraid any more. I don't know what I mean, Dad, but—'

It was about 'who the swine was' that most was said. Miss Hartnell didn't call him a swine. She called him 'the man'. I knew that I must never tell them it was Johnny. Because they'd break Johnny. Mum said he ought to swing for it; and I saw Johnny on the end of a rope. Mum said she'd make the swine pay until he screamed for mercy; and Miss Hartnell said it was a case of carnal knowledge and Mum's duty might well be to get such a person out of circulation so that other young people might be safe.

'Who was it? Who was it? Who was it?'

'I *will* know, if it takes me a lifetime. No man's going to upset my life like this and get away with it ! Do you think I'll ever hold up my head again? What am I going to tell your sisters, eh? And your grandmother? It'll finish her off, I can tell you that ! And I hope you'll be satisfied. You'll come to the funeral, my girl. *And* your father won't gloss it over like he always does. It's your father who's to blame for this ! Has he ever given you a hiding? No. He's yellow.'

I knew they'd go on for ever. On Miss Hartnell's door there was the 'engaged' ticket, so that no one would disturb us. Bells went, and feet clattered along the passage above and below, and there was laughter and talk and silence. In the silence I could hear Johnny :

'I'm frightened of what we've done, Kathy. Aren't you?'

'Yes . . . And yet I'm glad. You like me, Johnny, don't you? You like me more now, don't you Johnny? I felt as if I

was still on the Norton, going straight for the wall, and I heard the juke playing; and then I looked up at the stars and there was such peace . . . I'm the sky, and the grass. I'm even you, Johnny.'

'Who is the swine? What was his name? How old was he?'

In the end, I had to tell them who he was. I said his name was Dave, and he was thirty, and he drove a lorry, and I'd only seen him once when he gave me a lift. Mum didn't believe that bit. She said this hadn't happened only once; I could tell that to the Marines, because no girl got in the family way the first time; and she tried to make Miss Hartnell say it too but Miss Hartnell wouldn't. So I said I'd met him a second time.

'Where did this happen?'

'I don't remember, Mum.'

'I said where did this happen? Was it in his lorry?'

'Yes.'

'That night you were out till two?'

'Yes.'

'Oh my God, then you must be at least three months! I won't stand it! I'll have you put away! You ought to be in a lunatic asylum! You're like an animal. What was his other name? Dave what?'

'I don't know.'

That upset Mum more than anything—that I didn't know his other name. She asked me what I imagined I was going to put on the birth certificate, what the registrar would think when he was told: 'Name of father: Dave.' I wished I hadn't been such a fool. I wish I had said he was Dave Smith, or Tomlinson, or. . . .

I realized suddenly that there was a terrifying hush over the school. The final bell had gone, the last pair of uniform shoes had slapped down the nearby staircase, the last voice had laughed its way across the playground. And that broke me down because I loved my school. I was greedy to learn. I didn't want a baby. I just wanted the feel of being the ground and the stars and Johnny.

'You should cry! The time for crying was before you got into the lorry! It's a wonder you even knew his first name, if it was his first name, which I doubt. Swines like that are too careful to tell you their real names. Where was the lorry going?'

Oh God! I had manufactured a man and a name and a lorry and now I'd got to give it all a destination.

'Well? Where was it going?'

'I think it was Birmingham.'

'Oh . . . Birmingham. That's something to go on, isn't it, Miss Hartnell?'

'It would help the police to know what he was carrying.'

Mum sounded thrilled.

'You're right, Miss Hartnell! I hadn't thought of that. Well Kathy? You heard what Miss Hartnell said?'

What did lorries carry?

'We haven't got all night. What was it carrying?'

'Furniture.'

Mum sobbed, and Miss Hartnell got her some tea, and I looked out of the window. I felt desperate and frightened. I wanted help, and it was to Larry Pearce my mind turned—not to Dad, not to Johnny. Larry was afraid of nothing. And Larry liked me more than Johnny ever would. Johnny was really afraid of liking me. Johnny thought liking and loving were wrong. Larry knew as I did that they might be wrong and yet they were right if you got far enough down. I thought I'd run out as soon as we got home and get to the Caff and make Larry help me. I wouldn't speak to Johnny again, because if I did people might think it was him and he'd be so afraid he'd admit it and then they'd break him.

'It's no use, Miss Hartnell,' Mum said. 'I'm done! I just can't face this. Someone else will have to do it for me. I can't have her home. I can't have the neighbourhood gawping behind curtains at her . . . And there's her poor sisters . . . No. She's got to go away.'

Miss Hartnell wasted her time. I don't quite know what she was trying to do but she pleaded with Mum to sleep on it, to



give herself a chance of getting over the shock, to take me to a doctor, to take me home, to talk to my father. I knew Mum so well. I knew suddenly that she wouldn't have me home ever again.

I could have run away. Miss Hartnell made Mum go with her to the staff room on the next floor. They told me to wait. It was like waiting to be executed, yet I waited, with the back staircase there for me to run down. Stupidly, what I wanted just then was Mum—not Dad, not Johnny, not Larry—just Mum. I didn't care how much she went off at me, so long as she stayed by me and took away the feeling I had of not belonging anywhere. I wanted her to say: 'It doesn't matter what you've done, Kathy, I'll never leave you.' I could have died for Mum if she'd said that.

When she came up, I had my back to her. I daren't look at her.

'Put on your coat, Kathy,' Mum said. 'I've fixed everything . . . at least Miss Hartnell has. She's been very kind. I don't know what I'd have done without her. They're coming to fetch you. I said I wasn't well enough to take you myself; and I'm not. I don't know how I'm keeping on my feet. I'll bring your clothes for you tomorrow.'

I still didn't turn round. Inside me, I was saying: 'Mum! Mum!' as if I were a baby. I had never loved her as I did at that minute.

Miss Hartnell came to me:

'They're taking you into a children's home until they've sorted things out, Kathleen. You'll be all right there. You must write and tell me how you get on. And if there's anything I can do. I'm more sorry than I can say that this has happened. I was telling your mother, I expected great things of you, especially in English. You've a rare gift for words, you know.'

They kept us waiting for an hour and a half. In that time, Mum was all things, except loving. Every so often, she remembered 'that swine', and she asked fresh questions about him, and swung me round when I didn't answer. I recited my piece

over and over again. He was thirty. He was called Dave. He drove a lorry, a furniture lorry to Birmingham. He was married. Mum said she bet he was, and I let her have her way.

I wanted to ask them what a children's home was like, where it was, what they'd expect of me, whether I'd be locked in. I did ask one or two questions, but they angered Mum, so I fell to counting the purply grey slates over the cloakrooms.

Behind my back, I heard the door open. That was Mum going, leaving me. The fears I had had so often in my life when Mum had rowed with Dad and left the house came back to me.

'Mum!' I screamed and I clawed at her arm.

Miss Hartnell caught my shoulder.

'Come, Kathleen. Don't make it harder for your mother. Self-control, that's perhaps the only worthwhile thing we can teach you.'

'Mum! I'll do anything if you'll only. . . '

Mum turned then, and I wished I hadn't seen her face. It was so hard and thin and near grey.

'You should have thought of all this before. It's out of my hands now.'

I wanted Mum to go on. I could have listened to her for ever. Whatever she had said, it would have sounded sweet to me. But Miss Hartnell took Mum away. I could hear them going down the back staircase. I could hear the heavy door below being shut to; and I saw Mum walk across the playground and out of the iron gate.

IT wasn't often that they put you to bed in Prenderfold House—the Mother and Baby Home they had sent me to. You could be as sick as a dog, longing for death, and they'd expect you to 'get on with it'—to wash, iron, peel potatoes, sweep, scrub. . . .

But they put me to bed once; and only then did I realize that I hadn't been alone since the day Mum had come to see Miss Hartnell at my school. It was heaven to lie in a room by yourself and watch the sky, and hear nothing except the doctor grumbling his way up the three flights of stairs to the isolation room, or some heavy girl bringing a jug of barley water.

Barbara brought me some tea.

'Have you lost it yet?' she asked eagerly. 'Oo! You ain't half lucky! Wish I could lose mine. I jumped down seven stairs this morning, 'cos Mary said someone she knew. . . .'

Barbara looked grotesque. She was only thirteen, and tiny except below her stomach. She talked. She swore. She screamed with laughter. She had had five boys in a railway carriage on a siding.

'Will you go back home if you lose it? Will you see this Dave again? I bet you know his name, don't you? I think I'm going

to find an older man when I get out of here. I'm fed up with boys. I mean . . . Mary's in labour. Did I tell you? She ain't half kicking up a fuss. Old Wattsey smacked her face . . . said she was hysterical. Gives me the jitters. D'you think it's as bad as all that? I mean, d'you think it'll be too awful? If you split, I mean . . . Oh, I forgot to tell you: your Welfare Officer's downstairs. I expect she'll come up and put the record on all over again. . . .'

I turned to the wall, sick at the thought of having another, how, when, where and why session with Miss Hamson. Miss Hamson spoke like the radio and smiled like the telly and put up with any amount of rudeness.

'Bitch!' I said the last time she questioned me.

'Calling people bitches won't help matters, will it, Kathleen?' Even about that she had to ask a question!

Barbara must have gone. I must have dozed. I didn't hear anyone come in, but I opened my eyes and found a strange woman with glasses sitting beside me. I don't like women with glasses. If I had to wear glasses, I wouldn't.

'Had a nice sleep, Kathleen?' the woman asked. She pulled her chair nearer. 'I've come to have a little chat with you, Kathleen. How silly of me! You're wondering who I am, aren't you? I'm Marion Achesson, your new Child Care Officer.'

'What's happened to Miss Hamson?'

'She's left the department.'

'Which department?'

'Ours . . . The Children's Department. The one you come under.'

I got panicky then. Miss Hamson had spent weeks talking, questioning, making me lie. Would I have it all over again?

'Why has Miss Hamson left?'

'Why? Oh, I expect she got another job. People do, don't they? But let's not talk of Miss Hamson. Let's talk of you. I'm here to help you. I want to be your friend. I want you to be able to confide in me. You can tell me anything, Kathleen and I shan't be shocked. I've heard it all before, you see.'

She had a nice voice. She sounded all her letters at the end, like we used to have to do at school when we were reading aloud. I could have gone on listening to her for hours. But the trouble was, she would keep asking questions and waiting for answers. And when the answer didn't come, she would keep asking another question and another. She kept 'putting it in a different way, shall we?' She got more and more bothered at the silences between us. I didn't mind. I liked them.

'Don't you agree, Kathleen, that we shan't get anywhere together unless we both come clean, as you would say? I'll tell you anything you want to know, anything. . . .'

I quite liked her. I wanted her to stay talking.

'Yes . . . it's all very sad, especially for a girl of your intelligence. But we mustn't despair, must we? We must use this experience of yours as we must use all experience, to ensure that nothing like it ever happens again. I'm sure you'd never again accept a ride in a lorry, would you? Let me see, they never found the man, did they? I suppose he's still riding about the country picking up girls like you. But they'll catch up on him. They always do. I'm a great believer in : "Be sure your sins will find you out".'

She went over it all again, checking details from a file. She even asked when I'd had my last period and her lip tightened when I said I hadn't a clue. Mum had remembered that, and had told Miss Hamson the very minute it began and ended. Miss Achesson said of course none of them wanted me to lose the baby, but as that was also on the cards we had to plan for that, too.

'And if you do have the baby, well . . . that's something we must talk about. I know I shouldn't talk about adoption at this stage. But you are an intelligent girl, and you can appreciate a point of view, and your mother is in favour of adoption. What she wants is for the baby to be taken away the minute it's born so you don't get fond of it and there are no complications. And I'm not sure she's not right. She's been to the adoption society, anyway, and. . . .'

‘Did Mum say I could come back home after the baby?’

‘No . . . I’m afraid your mother is very bitter still about the whole thing. I went to see her last night, hoping I’d see your father too, but he was out. And your mother was as adamant as when Miss Hamson visited her. She has told your sisters and your relations that you’ve had a nervous breakdown and are in hospital. I did try, but I expect you know your own mother better than I do, and as yet we can do nothing about your return home. She still says she’ll never have you back, but she’ll change her mind I expect. Mothers do. I did beg her to come and see you, but she wouldn’t even do that.’

She talked on, and suddenly I couldn’t stand any more. I called her a liar. I told her to get out. I said it was *my* mother and *my* home, and what did she know about it, and I was going to leave that place that minute and go home, and she’d see whether what she’d told me was true or not. Mum would have me back. All Mum was worried about was not letting my young sisters know about babies and. . . .

Wattsey came up.

‘That’s enough Kathleen Purslowe, quite enough! You can just stoppit! D’you hear? Barbara! Clear this stuff away. I’ll come back when I’ve seen Miss Achesson out, and I’ll give her a tablet.’

# 4

THE day the baby was born, I was nothing. I was at peace. Nobody demanded 'Who's the father?' Nobody said: 'You must have it adopted', or 'Let's hope you've learned your lesson.'

And then my ears began to function:

'Come on, Kathleen! Drink this!'

'Come on! You're not dead yet, Lovey!'

When the nurses gave up, the patients in the hospital took over:

'It's all over now, Kid! Never again, eh? That's what we all say.'

'They say you're not fifteen!'

'What's the matter with the medical profession? I mean, I heard of a case of a kid of eleven. . . .'

'What kind of a swine got you like this, eh? I'd lop him if it was me!'

'I wouldn't stop at lopping.'

On the second day, I began to feel an interest in the people I could hear talking. I sat up and looked towards the woman the nurses called 'Mrs Connolly'. I knew without knowing how I knew, that the baby Mrs Connolly was feeding was her ninth.

My ears had taken in something she had said—that she hoped the blessed saints weren't listening, but if she had her time over again she'd be some other religion, and that was a fact.

I watched her feeding the baby, and didn't like what I saw. She had two great blobs of breasts that were bigger than the baby's head, and she held each breast in turn clipped between her first and second fingers so that it was like a paper bag of water—empty at the top, bursting with fullness at the bottom.

'Hullo, young Kathleen Purslowe! Decided to stay alive after all? Didn't you make a fuss, eh? My goodness me! Still, perhaps it's taught you a lesson, has it?'

Mrs Connolly jerked her teat out of the baby's mouth, and I got a full view of a lined red face. I thought: I hope my baby's not as ugly as that! And then I remembered I wasn't going to keep my baby . . . What the hell? Why should I care if it was ugly?

'I suppose they won't let you feed yours?' Mrs Connolly asked. 'Someone was saying they never let you young girls feed your babies, not even if you're just one bag of milk! You've got my sympathy. I always have too much milk, and getting rid of it isn't exactly a picnic.'

I watched her heave one of her breasts over the baby's head and into its mouth. She pointed across to a nurse. 'Isn't she a picture? That's our Nurse Brown. I say she could win any beauty competition she liked to go in for . . . If I were a writer, I'd write a story about her. I'm reading one of those hospital romances now . . . I know she's going to marry the doctor in the end, but it's still exciting.'

She went on clipping her breast, her admiring eyes on Nurse Brown. I watched Nurse Brown, too. She wore her cap on her fair hair as if it were a crown.

Something made me look towards the door of the ward. My heart stopped. I hadn't seen my mother for five months and in all that time I hadn't had a line from her; and there she was, talking to Sister! I felt sick with excitement. I had been hating her for months, but now I was loving her so that it hurt. She



had come to see me, although she had sworn she would never set eyes on me again, not if she lived to be a hundred. For long seconds, I adored her. And then I came to myself. I knew how it would be. She would come over and sob on my shoulder, but she wouldn't be sobbing because she loved me, but because she had always been so respectable and I had made it impossible for her ever to hold up her head again.

After the sobbing, she would remember everything I had ever done. She would tell anyone who would listen how respectable she had always been, how respectable her mother had always been; how she couldn't understand how I came to be as I was; how she blamed everything on to 'The Caff'. I could hear her voice :

'I begged and prayed of her not to go to the Caff. I begged and prayed of her to be like her sisters, to keep herself to herself, never to let a man say a thing out of place. I've said to her : "It's for a man to ask, Kathy, and for a woman to say no." But would she listen to me? No. And in the end, I had to have her put away. I couldn't have her about in her state where her young sisters were, now could I?'

Mother came hurrying down the ward, and I thought : Wouldn't it be wonderful if she forgot everything but that she wanted to see me; if she never asked one single question? I knew that wouldn't happen, so I turned away. But she came round to the other side of the bed and sobbed over me and said she had only just heard from the Mother and Baby Home that I had had to be admitted to hospital.

'Why didn't they let you have it in the Home? All the other girls do, don't they? Did you have complications? What happened? How did you get on? I asked the Sister, but I didn't get much out of her. She said I could wait and see the doctor if I liked, but I said "No thank you, Sister. She's not in my care now. It's for the Council to see the doctor, not me." Why did they move you from the Home, Kathy?'

'I don't know.'

'You must know. You're just being awkward. There must be a reason! I'm entitled to know! Why were you moved?'

'I was frightened . . . I made a fuss and. . . '

'It's a pity you weren't frightened before it happened, isn't it? That's the time for being frightened.'

She pulled out the stool from under my bed.

'I've brought you some oranges, Kathy . . . Lovely ones . . . I paid fivepence each for them. I didn't know what you would want.'

Tears kept falling down her cheeks.

'I shall never get over this, Kathy, never!'

'It's no good upsetting yourself, Mrs Purslowe!' Mrs Connolly called out. 'What's done's done.'

'But why did it have to happen to me?' Mum asked.

'It could happen to anyone, Mrs Purslowe,' a woman on the opposite side called out.

'Not to one of *my* girls it couldn't,' Mrs Connolly said. 'They're clean-living girls, religious, and. . . '

'I hope you're touching wood, Mrs Connolly,' the woman—called Mrs Midgeley—said.

Nurse Brown came then and took Mrs Connolly's baby away from her and put a screen round the bed.

'Poor thing,' Mum said. 'Got-too much milk, I expect. Looks like it to me. What about you, Kathy? Have they told you anything about your milk?'

I hated her for asking me that. I hadn't minded talking about milk in the Mother and Baby Home. It had seemed different with girls of my own age, lots of them younger.

Mum's sobs broke out afresh.

'I keep thinking of your poor innocent sisters. They don't know a thing about all this. I told them you had had to go into hospital—a mental hospital. And I reckon that's just where they ought to have put you, the way you were going on . . . I had to lock your sisters out in the garden while your dad went out and phoned the Mother and Baby Home. And when he came back and said it was all over, I went as white as a sheet.

Even your Dad noticed it, and he hardly ever looks at me now as you well know.'

Mum's voice went on and on. And she repeated what she had already said a dozen times before. The queer thing was I didn't mind. I let the words flow over me like the warm safe water in a bath, and I was strangely happy. It didn't matter that she repeated endlessly that if it was the last thing she did on this earth she would find out who the man was and she would make him pay till he squirmed. Her complaining and threatening combined in the nearest thing to a lullaby she had ever sung me. Mum's lullabies had been for Tina, never for me. And it sent me to sleep and it woke me a dozen times over. And each time I awoke, I got further away from the girl who had lived with a succession of other pregnant girls for months. I almost became the Kathleen Purslowe who attended the Teyne Foundation Grammar School and had planned to be the youngest girl to take G.C.E. Almost that Kathleen Purslowe but not quite. Miss Achesson was going to get me a job as soon as I was fit, and any dreams I had had of being a teacher I had better forget. . . .

Nurse Brown said that the doctor was coming to see me so Mum got up to go.

'You must have a peep at the baby on your way out, Mrs Purslowe,' Nurse Brown said.

Mum said very shortly: 'No thank you, Nurse.'

'You don't mean that, Mrs Purslowe!'

'I do mean it, Nurse! And in my place you'd mean it too. She's barely fifteen even now. I just can't bear to think of what she got up to to get that baby!'

Mum's sobs became violent.

'Now come on, Mrs Purslowe! Pull yourself together! The baby is only two days old. You can't take it out on the baby. And she's a real beauty, believe me. I'd be very proud of her if it was my grandchild!'

The sobs stopped as if they had been clicked off:

'It's no grandchild of mine, Nurse, and don't please call it that again! We're going to forget that that baby was ever born.

It's going to be adopted at the first possible moment. I've arranged it with the Adoption Society and Kathy has agreed. And that will be the end of that . . . My Kathy has plenty of brains. She was at the Teyne Foundation Grammar School when all this happened, top of her form, too . . . If she keeps her head screwed on the right way from now on, she'll get a decent job, and who is to know that any of this happened?"

Mum sobbed her goodbye until my face was wet. She said that if I behaved myself and came absolutely clean about the swine who was responsible for it all, she might have me back home.

"What was his name?" Mum demanded from halfway down the ward.

I thought of Johnny Park then. I wondered what he'd do if I met him in the Caff and said: 'Johnny! You're a dad and I'm a mum!' I had to bury my face in the pillow so that Mum wouldn't see me laugh. And then I didn't want to laugh because I knew Johnny was in danger. If anyone found out it was Johnny's baby, they might give Johnny Borstal until he was twenty-one, four whole years.

'You're safe, Johnny,' I whispered into the pillow. 'I'll never tell anyone, not till the day I die.'

'I must work on that mother of yours,' Nurse Brown said when Mum had gone. 'She ought to have your baby home.'

'I wouldn't let her have it home, even if she begged me. I wouldn't want my baby to grow up there. I've been sick of it for years. There's nothing to do. I had to try to do my homework with the telly on, and I got told off if I made a fuss.'

I AWOKE, it must have been a day later, to find a strange woman sitting at my bedside. I expected her to say something. She didn't. She might have been asleep herself. I thought: suits me, I'll go to sleep, too. Sleep is the only thing that's worth doing. But I found I couldn't go to sleep. Her presence seemed to be pressing on my head. And, although my eyes were shut, I could still see her — a well-groomed head coming out of a little high chest and a rounded back, very like the wooden ladies who come out of model Swiss chalets to tell you when the weather will be fine. She was quiet for so long that I had to open my eyes and say:

'What do you want?'

'I'm Mrs Sleeman-Evans . . .' She waited for me to say something. 'I don't suppose that means anything to you, but I work for an adoption society . . . I look after babies when they're first born until the people who are going to adopt them can have them.' She spoke very slowly. 'You see, I take the baby from the hospital to my own home, and I keep it for a few weeks until its new parents are quite ready. . . .'

I knew what she was going to say next. I didn't want to hear it. So I closed my eyes, and tried to think of other things. I

thought of the girls in Prenderfold House, remembered that Jennifer would be back now after her caesarean operation and she would be miserable because I wasn't there.

'I expect you're tired, Kathleen . . . Perhaps you'd like me to come another time? I don't want to worry you, but I thought you'd like to know that I shall take very great care of your baby until she goes to her new parents.'

I felt unhappy, so I said :

'Why should I care what happens to her? I couldn't care less what you do with her. I told my mother that. Drown her if you like!' I found I was crying and I felt mad with myself. 'Don't get the idea I'm crying over the baby! I'm remembering a kitten I was fond of that my mother drowned . . . I took it out of the bucket, and it was slimy and wet, and I dried it on my dress, and kept it warm under my jumper, but. . . .' Stupid-like, I kept crying. I dried my eyes on the sheet.

Mrs Sleeman-Evans sat watching me, smiling in what I suppose she thought was a very kindly way. She got on my nerves.

'O.K.' I said. 'You're going to take the baby. Mum has fixed it all up. What are you waiting for? Why keep on at me? Go and see Mum. It's fixed, isn't it? You're taking it, aren't you? Mum won't have me home if I don't get rid of the baby.'

Mrs Sleeman-Evans said slowly :

'I came too soon, didn't I? I'm sorry. I ought to have waited. But I wanted to see the baby. I love having them, you know. And yours is a truly beautiful baby. I'm as proud of her as if she were really mine!'

I felt uncomfortable, so I said :

'Change the record!'

'I'll go, shall I, and I'll come again in a day or so. What is the baby's name?'

'She hasn't got one.'

'You mean, you haven't thought of one yet? Oh, there's plenty of time.'

I wanted to get rid of her, so I said :

'It would singe your ears if you knew what I called it, when it was knifing my back!' I laughed in her face. 'You've got fancy ideas about mothers and babies, haven't you? You want to live where I had to live for the past few months! You want to mix with the girls I've been mixing with! I was a poor soft-hearted mutt when I went there! I used to feel hurt and sick—not because they had got up to what they had, but because they could talk about it, scream their heads with laughing about it! But after a bit, I screamed with laughing. I'd grown up. I got a kick out of hearing about it. And now I don't care about anything. I know what people are. I know even good people are bad . . . So what? Who cares?'

Mrs Sleeman-Evans got up again. While I had been speaking she had got up, sat down, got up, sat down.

'May I come and see you again?'

'You want me to tell you more?'

'I want to get to know my new baby's mother . . . I'd like to talk to you sometime. Goodbye for now!'

She was halfway down the ward when I shouted :

'Hi! Come back! Mrs Sleeman-Evans!'

She came back, looking glad, and I turned away, feeling the grandmother of all fools. I had wanted to ask her if she was taking my baby home today. I don't know why I wanted to know. I couldn't have cared less. I expect I wanted to be absolutely free of it, to know it had gone for ever, to know that it wasn't behind that glass wall where fathers came to gawp at their babies.

'You called me back, Kathleen,' Mrs Sleeman-Evans said.

'Did I? I suppose I was going to find out when you were coming next.'

She looked silly, she was so pleased.

'I could come any time you wanted me to. I haven't got a baby at the moment. I've been waiting for yours, you see.'

'You haven't got mine yet, then? I mean, you haven't taken it away yet?' I must have been a bit round the bend. I hung on to her answer, as if it was a sentence or a reprieve. She was so

slow, I could have killed her. She set her face in a lady-like smile, and even then paused maddeningly before she said :

'No . . . I shan't fetch your baby until next week. I usually have them at about eight days. You could come to my home to see your baby, if you liked. . . .'

I laughed.

'What do you take me for? What would I want to come and see it for? I want to get rid of it . . . to start all over again!' It must have been weakness. I kept crying.

Mrs Sleeman-Evans nodded, and I panicked, thinking she would go.

'You haven't asked who the father is,' I said.

Everybody in the whole world was interested in who the father was, so I guessed Mrs Sleeman-Evans would be. She again set her face in that lady-like smile.

'Why should I ask that? What can it possibly matter to me?'

'What can it possibly matter to anybody? Yet my mother has nearly killed me because I won't tell her, and every welfare officer in the world has been at me asking me who he is. I've been grilled for hours.'

She stared at me for a long time.

'Do you want to tell me who he is?'

I shouted at her :

'Why should I?'

'Sorry . . . I got the impression you might want to tell someone. And I'm a stranger as yet, and it's sometimes easier to talk to strangers.'

I kept my eyes on her to try and make her stay. I didn't understand myself at all. I wanted her there. I felt I would scream if she started walking down the ward.

'Why have you never told anyone who the man was?'

'Why should I?'

'I just wondered. . . .'

I suddenly wanted to come clean. I said :

'I don't know why I did it . . . It was my fault, not his. It was the juke, and his Norton and the scream of his brakes, and



then the quiet under the stars that made you want to dig your nails into your hands and draw blood and . . . It wasn't his fault. He didn't try anything on me ever. He was kind of dumb. You can't punish someone for being kind of dumb, can you?' I felt wracked with pain again, the kind I'd had at Prenderfold House before the baby was born. And I seemed to hear my screams coming at me as if I were under a great bell.

'Help me !' I said, like a fool.

'How ?'

'I don't know, but help me. I want Larry Pearce. . . .'

'Is he the father ?'

'No. That's true. I'm being honest for once. But Larry's the only one who's not afraid. Dad's terribly afraid. Even Mum's afraid. I wasn't, but I am. . . .'

Mrs Sleeman-Evans didn't touch me. I was grateful for that. I wanted her to hug me; yet if she had put a finger on me I'd have screamed. It was as if she wasn't there, as if I was talking to myself, pretending nothing.

'Could I find this Larry Pearce for you?'

'I don't know.'

'How old is he?'

'Nineteen . . . He works for the Supermarket—steady, been working there four years. I went to his house once. It's not so good as ours, but it's better. His Mum and Dad love each other . . . Funny, isn't it? And they even liked me. I've never seen Johnny's Mum and Dad. They wouldn't like me. They think only fast girls go to the Caff. I suppose that's true. I am fast.'

'Who is Johnny?'

I realized I had made a mistake.

'Johnny? Just a boy . . . Nobody I know well. He's only seventeen. The man, you know, the lorry driver, he was thirty and. . . .'

I was suddenly terribly tired, and I wanted to be alone. I turned away.

'Well, goodbye, Kathleen. I'll come tomorrow, shall I? Do

go and have a look at your baby next time you go to the bathroom.'

'I shall never go and see her,' I said.

'Do, Kathleen! She's right bang in the middle of the glass screen. They're so proud of her, they've made her the centre-piece.'

'You're only kidding. . .

'No. She *is* in the centre.'

She left me abruptly, and I watched her unhurried walk down the ward.

'Is that your welfare officer?' Mrs Connolly called. 'She looks like a welfare officer to me—kind of dowdy but ladylike. I don't know how they manage it. If I wore clothes like that, someone would put me in a jumble sale.'

Again I was frightened of being alone. I wanted somebody, anybody to talk to me; so I said:

'That was the lady who is going to look after the baby till it's adopted.'

Mrs Connolly pursed her lips and tut-tutted and shook her head.

'So that's what's in store for it, is it? It's terrible to have children and pass them on to someone else as if they were second-hand clothes! I don't know whether I agree with all this adoption. I reckon there'd be fewer illegitimate babies if girls were kept in to look after them. Haven't you got any feelings for your baby?'

'None.'

'I don't understand that, I mean, nobody could be more annoyed than I am when I find I've fallen again; but once the baby is here, well . . . I can't help feeling that one day you'll be sorry you parted with your child. Perhaps in twenty years time you'll remember, and once you've remembered you won't be able to forget. It'll haunt you, wondering what she's like, where she is, whether she's happy. . . .'

She didn't talk for a long time, and then she suddenly said:

'I could cry when I think of your little one. What will its life

be? I've known of many an adopted child coming unstuck later on. There must be something in mother love that kills you if you haven't got it. One boy I knew of was always running away to find his real mother. *He* ended up in Borstal. If I was you, I'd keep the baby. I'd know it was sent to me for a purpose and I'd work my fingers to the bone to fulfil the purpose. There's a purpose in everything.'

I suddenly hated Mrs Connolly.

'Change the record!' I screamed.

And I turned on my other side and tried to sleep.

## 6

THE husbands came in the evenings, and then for me it was like looking-in on the telly. At each bed, there would be a man, and each would bring a little parcel and take a little parcel away. Some couples sat holding hands as if they were gormless young lovers, not old married people with babies behind them. There was one old man, as grey as my grandfather, who was first in and last out and yet I don't reckon he ever spoke a word. I used to watch his mouth specially.

This evening when the husbands burst in, who should come up the ward but Johnny Park! He looked such a fool with a great bunch of flowers in his hand. He came to me, looking as if I was dead and this was my funeral.

'What are you doing here?' I said. 'Who told you where I was?'

He was crying, just standing there crying like a great big boob, letting everyone see him too, not even mopping up his tears with a handkerchief.

I said: 'You'd better come back when you've got over whatever's biting you.'

Nurse Brown came then, and pulled out a stool for him, and

took his flowers from him and said she'd put them in water. He sat by my bed, and it made me laugh. *I* had got a man by my bed, just as if I was a respectable married woman! And though I laughed till I cried, Johnny didn't ask me what was up. All he could say was: 'Kathy . . . oh Kathy!'

I asked him how he had found out where I was. He said:

'May I drop dead, Kathy, but I didn't know you were in trouble! It didn't even cross my mind, not even when you didn't come to the Caff any more, not even when I couldn't catch you coming out of your house! You won't believe me perhaps, but it wasn't until this dinner-time when a man at my work was boasting about his wife being in here for her first baby, and he said there was a kid in here not fifteen, name of Kathleen Something! I was eating at the time, reading, but this name Kathleen Something not quite fifteen in for a baby got on my brain! I thought of it all the afternoon at work, and then tonight I came here and asked what ward Kathleen Purslowe was in, just to trick them into saying they'd never heard of her . . . And they told me "Maternity Block E.3"!'

I said: 'You don't half look a wet, Johnny! You ought to do this tear-dropping act on the telly. You'd make a fortune at it!'

'I'm sorry, Kathy,' he said. 'But you be me, and see if you'd cry! I've been looking for you for months, and so has Larry Pearce. We were always hanging about somewhere waiting in case we saw you. I asked your mother so often that she threatened me with the police! She said you'd gone into a mental hospital. She wouldn't tell me which one. Larry and I even went out to that one at Epsom, and they said you weren't there, and never had been.'

He tried to take my hand.

'Drop dead, Johnny!' I said. 'You're getting boring!'

'Tell me it wasn't me, Kathy!' he begged.

'If it wasn't you, it was the Invisible Man or the Holy Ghost, one of the two.'

Johnny was weeping buckets.

'It couldn't have been me, Kathy! I wouldn't have done a thing like that to you!'

'O.K. Big Boy! It wasn't you. Anyway, what are you worried about? I never told a soul it was you, and I never will. Don't ask me why. I just won't . . . But if you sit blubbering there, that old woman in the next bed will be able to answer the sixty-four thousand dollar question! So it wasn't you! O.K.! Finished! Let's say it was Larry Pearce.'

'Why didn't you tell me you were in trouble, Kathy?'

'What good would that have done?'

'I'm sure it wasn't me, Kathy! I wouldn't have let you go through a thing like that!'

'O.K.! But don't keep on about it!'

'If it wasn't me, who was it?'

'I told you—the Invisible Man or the Holy Ghost.'

'You mean you didn't do it with anyone else, not ever?'

'No.'

'You swear it?'

'Do I have to swear a thing like that to you? I lie as hard as I can to my mother, to doctors and people like that. But I don't have to lie to my friends.'

There were more tears as he said :

'So it *was* me! *I* got you into trouble!'

'I suppose now you're going to throw yourself over the bridge, are you?'

'I got you into trouble, Kathy! *I* did it!'

'Go and get a microphone, Johnny!' I said. 'Tell the world! They've all been at me for months, trying to find out who the father was!'

'Why haven't you told them?'

'It's no business of theirs. And, anyway, all they wanted to know for was to put you in prison.'

Johnny was dead scared. He was too scared to cry.

'They couldn't do that! You wanted it as much as me!'

'That wouldn't make any difference. I'm under sixteen. I know all about it now. I've been living in a Mother and Baby

Home most of the time since Mum threw me out, and lots of the girls told me the man had gone to prison for it!’

Johnny stared at the floor as if he was already in prison.

Mrs Connolly’s husband had gone and she was sitting up in bed sucking sweets and watching us and trying to hear what we were saying.

‘Who’s your friend?’ she shouted.

‘He’s not my friend,’ I said. ‘He’s my girl friend’s brother. She sent him up with some flowers because she’s had an accident and can’t come herself. . . .’ I saw Johnny’s face, still wet with tears. ‘He always gets like this in hospital! He once had a terrible operation.’

‘I thought perhaps it was your boy friend.’

I made myself scream with laughter at that.

‘Him! My boy friend! If I couldn’t do better than that I’d be a nun! I’ve hardly ever seen him before. And for my part I’ll hardly ever see him again.’

Mrs Connolly watched us closely. I said to Johnny under my breath:

‘Pull your stool round so she can’t see my lips! She’s a proper nosey nanny. She’ll get a policewoman at me and I won’t be able to remember the story I’ve told everybody.’

Johnny would have made a hopeless crook. Instead of accidentally shifting his seat, he stood up, stared across at Mrs Connolly as if he was going to say something, and then carefully pulled his stool round so that she knew he had put his back to her to hide my face.

‘Honestly!’ I exploded.

‘What have I done wrong?’ he asked.

‘Skip it! But get your brains tested!’

‘You didn’t mean what you said about hardly ever seeing me again, Kathy?’

‘I expect I did. . . .’

‘But I’ve been looking for you for months!’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know exactly.’

'I do!' I said, and I laughed like the girls in the Home, and he got my meaning and he blushed. 'Call yourself a man, Johnny?'

He tried to take my hand.

'Give over, Johnny, can't you?'

'I didn't want to see you for *that*, Kathy, honest!'

'You mean you get it from Susan and Merle?'

If he wasn't blubbing again, and he didn't look so handsome crying!

'I've never had it with anyone else, Kathy . . . and I don't want it anymore, not even with you now I've got you into all this trouble! I wouldn't have hurt you, Kathy! I liked you, Kathy! I always will like you.' I want you to go steady with me!'

'Change the record!' I said.

'Will you go steady with me, Kathy?'

'No.'

'Why won't you? Is it because of what I did to you? I won't do it again!'

'You won't get the chance, Big Boy!' He looked miserable, and I felt terribly excited.

Nurse Brown came then.

'Time, Gentlemen!' she sang.

Johnny got all hot and bothered.

'I'll come tomorrow, Kathy.'

'Don't you!' I said.

'I've got to! I've got to talk to you!'

'You bore me!'

'You haven't told me about the baby.'

'Why should I?'

'You said it was mine.'

'And you said it couldn't be!'

'Don't play with me, Kathy! I feel so awful I can't face leaving you! I'd like to throw myself under a train!'

'There are plenty of trains to choose from. Electric ones are best.'



'You wouldn't care?'

'I couldn't care less. And now listen, Johnny Park! They're all watching you. If you go on like this, you'll find yourself in prison. If a policewoman tackled you you'd be in prison!'

'But that's not fair! You wanted it more than me! You. . . .'

'Says you!'

'But you did, Kathy! I was frightened, wasn't I?'

'You always are frightened, Johnny, and you always will be. You haven't got a lot of guts, not like Larry Pearce. Larry Pearce has got guts, that's one thing.'

'Larry Pearce has got everything,' Johnny said. He stood up, and if the whole ward hadn't guessed he was the baby's father, they'd have known it then. The silly great oaf just stood as if he was facing a firing squad.

The clock struck eight, and immediately there was the sound of many pairs of shoes tapping on the bare wooden floors. Johnny went miserably after them.

'Cheerio!' I shouted. 'Give my love to your sister! Tell her I'll go and see her when I'm out of here.'

The fool came back.

'My sister . . . ?' he began.

'You're the brother of my best friend, Johnny Park!' I said between my teeth. 'They ought to have drowned you at birth!'

MRS MIDGELEY on the opposite side of the ward, was the one who helped everybody. She came to me when I was sobbing one day. I don't know why. She brought me a glass of Lucozade.

'Come on, Ducky. Drink this. It works wonders!' I tried to drink it, but I couldn't swallow. 'What a babe you are, to be sure! They ought to leave you alone after what you've been through. There always seems to be someone at you!'

'She can't expect anything else,' Mrs Connolly shouted. 'Out of hand, that's what the girl is, and that's how she came to be in the mess she is, you take it from me!'

'Come on, Ducky! Drink it!' Mrs Midgeley said. 'It used to be a cup of tea in the war, didn't it? I remember in an air raid a woman was sitting by a dead boy, and all I could say was "I'll get you a cup of tea!" Silly, wasn't it? But of course you wouldn't remember those days. . . .'

I drank the Lucozade.

'Now blow your nose . . . Works wonders, doesn't it? You're such a pretty little girl, you know. I suppose it's the pretty ones that come unstuck, men can't resist them. But don't let it get you down. You're not the first girl to have a baby, and

you won't be the last . . . You've got a long life ahead of you. One day you'll be very happy, and all this will help to make you realize it . . . Shall I tell you something, Kathleen, only don't let it make you vain . . . ? Watching you, I've been hoping my baby will look like young Kathleen when she's fifteen !'

'You're kidding !'

'I wouldn't kid you, and why should I? Of course I've got some hope. My baby is black haired and your hair is almost white. But her eyes are blue just like yours. Next time I have her, would you like to see her?'

'No.'

'Don't you like babies?'

'I used to want to bath one.'

'They showed me your baby yesterday. Poor little love ! I made my Jack go and watch her through the screen. I'm sure babies know things. I'm sure she knows that no fond father stands watching her . . . I don't like to think some glimmer of the truth might get to her. Why don't they ever bring her in to see you? Is it some rule? Someone said it's because she's going to be adopted, and they don't want you to get too fond of her.'

I laughed.

'They needn't worry about that !'

Mrs Midgeley stared at me.

'You're a funny girl, Kathleen. I know you're still only a child yourself, but I should have thought a helpless little baby like yours would make you feel, well . . . Still, what do I know about it? I'm over twice your age and I've only just had my first baby; and I don't mind telling you I was dead scared at one point . . . And yet now I'm so pleased with myself you'd think no other woman had ever had a baby !' She sat quietly for a while, knitting a pink coat. 'What are you going to call your baby?'

'It's not my baby any more.'

'Of course it is ! It'll always be your baby !'

'It's going to be adopted. My mother has fixed it all up, and. . . .'

She looked as if she was going to cry.

'I suppose you know best . . . But you might want it one day. I don't know anything about your business, but isn't there a chance that you and the father might come together later on? And then you'd wish to God you'd kept your baby. I mean, don't run away with the idea that babies are easily come by *always*. I've been married nearly thirteen years, and for nearly ten of them I've been trying to get a baby . . . I mean, I'm as fond of my Jack as it's possible to be, but it's not enough. . . .' I listened to the clicking of the needles. 'How old was he, ~~kid~~ kid? What did he do for a living?' -

'Even you've got to be nosey,' I said.

Tears came immediately to her eyes, and I was sorry I had said it.

'Yes . . . it was being nosey, wasn't it? But I was thinking about you two coming together again, thinking of a happy ending, I suppose.'

I watched her cry, and then I couldn't stand it. I swung my legs out of bed.

'I feel sick!' I said.

'Oh you poor kid! Wait a minute! I'll get you a bowl!'

But I ran up the ward. Nurse Brown caught me up.

'Are you practising for the Olympics, Sweetheart?'

'I feel sick.'

'Come into the kitchen,' she said, and she sat me at the window. 'It's sick of people you are, isn't it Sweetheart? Is that better?'

Nurse Brown looked just like a film star dressed up as a nurse, especially the crown she made of her cap. Her eyes were very large, and her lashes were so long they could have been stuck on with adhesive. I had one of those sudden feelings of love I get. I wanted to tell her everything, even the answer to the sixty-four thousand dollar question. I wanted to tell her I had made Johnny do it, each time, because he was always afraid.

I wanted to know if she had ever done it. I wanted to know if I'd ever be as mad as that again, as excited, as forceful. I wanted to know why I had got a baby, while Susan and Merle at the Caff, who boasted about how many boys they could chalk up, didn't get a baby. Even the time Susan got a pound from an American hadn't made her have a baby.

I sat watching Nurse Brown, half the girl who had lived for months in a Mother and Baby Home and half the girl who hadn't the slightest idea where she'd be sleeping a week ahead when she left hospital if they didn't send her back to the Home. I listened, lulled, to the tinkle of crockery, knowing Nurse Brown was going to cure me of everything with a cup of tea.

She sat on the other side of the window, and drank tea too. I wished then that I could be like her—cool and clean and lovely and knowing so much. *She* wouldn't have lain on the grass and pulled Johnny on top of her . . . She would be a bride in a shimmering dress and long white veil and. . . .

I realized Nurse Brown was laughing at me.

'What a funny stare you have, Sweetheart! You almost went cross-eyed! What were you seeing? You certainly weren't seeing me!'

'I was. You had your wedding dress on!'

'Give me a chance, Sweetheart! I'm going to have lots more fun before I do that! I don't want to get married yet awhile, because when I do it's going to be for keeps. At the moment, life is grand fun! I've got a man, more or less steady, but I don't have an attack of conscience if I'm not too faithful to him. I've got so many things to do before I get married. I'm going to Switzerland for my holiday, and I may even do a year in America . . . But, don't let's talk about me. Let's talk about you. What's been the trouble?'

I was so happy just then, I couldn't remember ever having had any trouble.

'What made you feel sick?' Nurse Brown asked.

'Questions,' I said, remembering. 'They all ask questions.'

'Don't they just? And they don't only ask *you* the questions!'

They ask us. Of course we know nothing. If we did, we wouldn't say.'

'You don't ask questions,' I said.

She laughed.

'I do you know. Haven't I ever asked you about your bowels? But I mustn't tease you. I know what you mean. I suppose they want to find the man. They want to have their revenge on him because you were only fourteen. . . .'

'What's the good of revenge? It won't take the baby back, will it?'

'You're dead right.'

'You don't want revenge on him?'

'I'm a sinner, too, you know. Aren't we all?'

'I don't believe you ever do anything wrong. I'd like to be like you—pure and good and. . . .'

Nurse Brown shook my shoulders:

'Here! Hold on! Nobody is pure and good—not in thought, word *and* deed, anyway. You don't want to think you're different from other people, Sweetheart. You're younger, that's the trouble. But you're the same as every one of those in the ward, the same as me, the same as Sister—only don't you dare to tell her I said so.'

I thought, she doesn't get my meaning. What I mean by pure and good is someone who doesn't pull Johnny down on top of them, and mock him . . . Someone who doesn't even want to.

'I wish I could be different, Nurse,' I said.

She hugged me.

'I can't see anything wrong with you that won't be cured by growing just a little older. You look very sweet to me, bewildered, but sweet. And you'd look sweet to any man with half a heart. Come on now, Sweetheart, get back to bed before Sister comes and bawls at me. And don't think any more about goodness and badness. You're at the honest stage, when you dare to know yourself . . . I'll tell you one thing I remember I was doing at your age: I was sitting in the science lab., "seeing" the science master in the nude . . . Whole lessons I spent

seeing him that way. I was nuts on him. I was still pure in deed, but not in thought. I didn't exist for him, luckily for me. . . .'

She smacked my bottom playfully, and pushed me towards the ward.

'Do you still want to be like me?'

I went up the ward, seeing Nurse Brown in a classroom, her eyes on the naked science master at the easel . . . Funny, I had never seen Johnny naked.

I got into bed and hid my head under the sheet. Thinking of Johnny naked wasn't nice.

NURSE BROWN brought Johnny Park to my bedside that evening.

'Your friend's brother has come to see you, Sweetheart,' she called out before she reached me. 'Let me bump your pillow up . . . That's better, isn't it? Now, young man, you sit round this side and you'll be nice and private.'

I blushed when I saw Johnny. It was Nurse Brown's fault with her talk about seeing the science master naked. Johnny didn't notice. He looked excited.

'I've seen it , Kathy!' he said.

'Seen what?'

'The baby, Kathy! They call it "Baby Purslowe"! I wanted to go in and pick it up, but they wouldn't let me! It's a smashing kid, Kathy, it is, honest! I saw it on the way out yesterday! I just couldn't believe it! It's perfect already, and its nails are lovely! I was so excited, I nearly told the porter downstairs about it! I had the hardest job not to tell Mum about it! Fancy having something like that and not being able to tell anyone! I'm going to tell Larry Pearce about it. You wouldn't mind that, would you? Larry would never let anyone down, and of course it won't always be like it is now, will it? How old do we



have to be to be able to claim the baby? I mean to be able to say it's ours and have it and. . . ?'

'You must be round the bend, Johnny Park!' I said. 'That's not our baby any more. We've given it away!'

Johnny stood up, terribly angry.

'We bloody-well haven't given it away, Kathy!'

'Sit down, Johnny, if you don't want the whole ward to hear you and land you in prison! The baby's going to be adopted. My mother has arranged it. All I've got to do is to sign in three months' time, or six months. I can't remember.'

'O.K. Let it be adopted till we're ready for it.'

'Adoption is for ever, Johnny! They explained it all to me, to warn me, they said. I shall never never never see the baby again. They don't even let you know who's adopting it, in case you turn up and try to take it back and. . . .'

Johnny stared incredulously at me.

'And you mean to tell me you want it like that?'

'I couldn't care less.'

'But have you ever seen it? I mean, it's smashing! It's got hair and long nails, and its eyes are open and . . . Don't let 'em take it away, Kathy!'

I looked him up and down from his Hamlet hair-cut to his winkle-picker shoes.

'I wonder what I ever saw in you, Johnny Park? I wonder why I didn't choose Larry Pearce instead. I must have seen something in you to chase you the way I did, mustn't I? But I'm damned if I can see it now! Grow up, can't you? You're looking now as if someone got on your motor-bike to see how it felt, and rode off on it! What has the baby got to do with you? And why should you get all het up about it when yesterday you didn't even know it was alive? I'm getting bored with seeing you! I shall tell the nurse you put my temperature up, and then they won't let you in!'

Johnny slumped down as if he was made of over-wet clay. He sat staring in front of him at something I couldn't see.

'I don't get it, Kathy! It's your baby, and you haven't even seen it!'

'That's where you're wrong, Johnny Park,' I told him. 'I saw it when it was born, and it gave me the nightmare!'

'It must be different now! It gets different every day. It's bigger today than it was yesterday, and it looked at me. I whispered to it: "I'm your old man! Just think of it! Me!" and I was thinking of buying it iced lollies, and taking it to the zoo, and getting a side-car. . . .'

'Get yourself a dog,' I said. 'You're getting boring! I mean, you come to see me in hospital, and all you can talk about is babies! I'm sick of babies! I'm sick of hearing baby talk, seeing them fed, seeing screens put round old women and guessing the filthy things they're doing to them! Now don't talk about babies any more! And, anyway, what would you do with a baby?'

He looked at me as if I was an old woman who wouldn't let him have a second helping.

'I could take it out on Sundays. . . .'

'And wouldn't you be popular at the Caff, eh? Especially if it messed itself and was stinking and. . . .'

'Don't be horrible, Kathy! I've been thinking about the baby all night and all day . . . I couldn't work, and at dinner-time, I had to go for a walk on my own, or I'd have shouted out in the canteen: "I've gotta kid!" It was worse than when I first got my motor-bike. I kept thinking of coming home and seeing it there and dancing it round the room! I mean, the whole thing's a scream, Kathy! I'm the kid's old man! Me!'

He laughed till he cried.

Nurse Brown came over, and plumped my pillows up and put a thermometer in my mouth. When she was bending over me, she said very quietly to Johnny:

'Listen, Big Boy! I couldn't hear what you were saying, but the rest of the ward could. Do you think you're on the telly? You've been throwing your arms about, and rolling your eyes

and standing and sitting, and now you're crying, you great big goof !'

'I'm sorry, Miss,' Johnny said.

'You're such a couple of kids, you don't think. I mean, I'd only have to have one guess about you two, and I'd be right each time !'

'I don't follow, Miss !'

'Look ! I could go to the police and say you're the baby's father, couldn't I ?'

'You wouldn't !'

'How do you know ? I might think it was my duty ! What I'm trying to say is that if the whole ward doesn't know by now you're the father . . . !'

She leaned over me and took the thermometer out of my mouth, stared at it, then wrote something on my chart. Then she grumbled loudly about the state of my bed, and she said she would have to stop me having visitors if it put my temperature up. And when she was right at the foot of the bed, pushing it this way and that, she said :

'You'd better start saying your goodbyes, young man . . . Now, don't tell me it's early. I know that.'

Johnny stood up looking as if he had been whipped, and Nurse came round to the other side. I could hardly hear what she said :

'Listen you two. If you go on the way you're going, Mrs Connolly will be screaming for the police. You want to forget that baby, forget it ever happened, and see it never happens again, not till you're old enough to cock a snook at the world and say : "We gotta baby. So what ? It's ours !" You're in a hole, young man ! One move, and you'll be in Borstal, or prison or wherever they put people like you. I don't know what they do to them, but they do something. Take my advice, and don't see each other again till she gets out of here, till you can be private. If I can help, I will. I'll take messages. I'll send them. But I've got to be careful. You've got to be even more care-

ful . . . I'm going over to Mrs Midgeley now, and when I'm there I'll bark at you for not being gone, see?"

Johnny sat down, his knees wide apart, his hands hanging between his legs.

'I don't get it,' he kept repeating.

'Don't get what?'

'Anything. I couldn't hear half she said. She talked like a crook. She made me feel awful, as if I was revving up to shoot down that hill and my tyre burst.'

'That was the night that . . .' I began.

'Shut up!' Johnny said.

'You're gone all pure again, Johnny Park. You always were pure really . . . You were always mad at me for teasing you into doing it. . . .'

'Shut up, I tell you!'

'I expect I'd tease you just the same, Johnny, if we were on our own. Funny, isn't it? I didn't think I ever would again. I didn't, honest! And now suddenly I know I would . . . Johnny! You've gotta buy me a present . . . All the men buy women things. . . .'

'I paid seven bob for the flowers!' he protested.

'Swindle! And who wants flowers except the dead? No, I want one of those white crash helmets. Johnny . . . I look smashing in them, kind of saucy. One of the girls at the Mother and Baby Home had one. She said I could wear it when I went out. But the old woman at the Home wouldn't let us borrow or lend. Go on, Johnny! Swear you'll buy me one!'

'I can't! I'm paying for my new bike as hard as I can!'

'What have you got now?'

'A Norton again.'

'Honest?'

'It's pretty good.'

'Who do you have for pillion?'

'Nobody.'

'You can tell that to your kid sister. . . .'

'It's true. You don't get me, Kathy . . . I've been looking

for you. The minute I got the new Norton, I went to look for you. I went to that mental hospital at Epsom on it, and they said they had never heard of you. It's outside.'

Sister came down the ward.

'Time, please, and I mean NOW not in half an hour!'

Johnny got up.

'I want to ask her if I can see the baby,' he said, and he went after her.

'Johnny!' I called. I wanted him to promise me he would buy me the white crash helmet. But he went on after Sister through the swing doors.

Mrs Connolly said :

'It's a crying disgrace!'

'What did you say?' I asked.

'I said it's a crying disgrace letting that chap come in and see you!'

'Why shouldn't he come and see me?'

'You know very well why he shouldn't come and see you! It's like a murderer coming to see the body, if you ask me! I couldn't have believed anyone would have had the nerve! I wasn't born yesterday, my girl! It sticks out a mile who that boy is! He ought to be inside where he can't do any more harm, or better still castrated! And as for you, watching you made my blood boil! You've learned no lesson! You were all but begging him to get into bed with you in front of the lot of us!'

I got out of bed. I went over to her.

'Have you finished?' I said.

She had a mouth like a new moon that has heaved itself off its back.

'Yes, I've finished—as far as you're concerned, that is. But not as far as that boy is concerned . . . He won't come here again, flaunting himself! I'm making a complaint in the proper quarters, and that will settle his hash once and for all.'

I said : 'If you hurt Johnny, I'll kill you! I mean it! I *will* kill you!'

'Don't you threaten me ! It won't do you any good ! I know when a thing's right and when it's wrong.'

I watched her for a few seconds, something inside me turning over and over. There was such a clever look on her face that I couldn't help myself. I had to smash my fist into it. And, once I had hit her, I was so mad I could have killed her; and would have killed her, I daresay, if a whole bunch of them hadn't dragged me away, dragged me right down the ward, screaming and letting them have the kind of language that was commonplace in Prenderfold House, that used to hurt me to hear, that once I couldn't have used.

When they got me out of the ward, Sister appeared. She ordered the lot of them to get back to their beds. She said they were like a pack of wolves. She didn't take any notice of me until we were alone and the ward door shut.

'I don't know what all the trouble was about, and I don't care. All I know is that I won't have it ! You'd better be by yourself for a bit, under my nose !'

And she put me in a small room next to the kitchen, and told Nurse Brown to keep a big eye on me.

## 9

I was tired out and yet I couldn't sleep. I could hear people walking backwards and forwards. I could hear the clatter of cups next door. Every now and then, Nurse Wallace peered through the spy-hole. I didn't like Nurse Wallace. She had nagged about my murderous attacks and had threatened me with a strait jacket if I didn't stop my nonsense.

Outside I could see the stars, so many of them. I seemed to be lying on the grass beside Johnny, at peace because I could make believe that in an hour I'd be at home, Mum's shouting over, lying beside Tina.

Nurse Wallace came in :

'Quieter now?'

'Can I go back to my own bed? This room gives me the willies.'

'Are you actually asking to be allowed back in the main ward? Do you realize you've blacked Mrs Connolly's eye? You'll be lucky if she doesn't sue you for assault!'

'It wasn't my fault! She interfered! She nosed into my business! I'll say I'm sorry. . . .'

'That's all too easy to say, and it won't cure her eye. Now, come along! Get settled down for the night!'

'Please let me go back! I like being with the others!'

'You should have thought of all that, shouldn't you? Now, get to sleep!'

She turned the overhead light off and shut the door. And I turned so that I could watch the stars, and think of Johnny and even of Larry Pearce. I felt so wide awake that I was sure I would never sleep again. But I must have slept, because when I awoke there was a grey streak in the sky and Nurse Brown was bending over me.

'Hush, Kathy! It's only me . . . Nurse Brown. Don't make a noise. It's still night, and I'm not due on till seven. But I'm worried about that young friend of yours. Sister told me that Mrs Connolly had lodged a complaint with the Almoner and wanted the police told. She says she'll sue you for assault, and that that will bring the whole thing out into the open and get that boy put away . . . He ought not to come here again. Is there any way of stopping him?'

'You mean . . . I should tell him not to come?'

'Of course you should. We don't know the boy. Nobody knows where he comes from except you. You've protected him so far by refusing to give his name, and I don't see why you can't go on doing it when they question you. But if he comes here, and the police get him, it wouldn't be very difficult for them to make him admit everything.'

I didn't want to talk any more. I wanted to go back to sleep. I stretched my legs and found cool places in the bed. They made me feel rich, so rich that I didn't give a damn for Mrs Connolly.

Nurse Brown shook me :

'Kathy! For goodness sake listen! How can we get hold of the boy? You wouldn't want him to go to Borstal, now would you? They'll send him there, believe you me, if they get proof that he committed an offence against a girl of fourteen. He knew you were fourteen, I suppose?'

'I shall tell them it wasn't him. I shall say it was lots of boys.'

'That's a silly thing to say, and it wouldn't help him, once



they got him. He's just a handsome goof. What would happen if they questioned him?'

I sighed.

'Johnny tells the truth mostly. That's his trouble.'

'You don't tell the truth?'

'I do sometimes.'

'It was him?'

'I don't know.'

'What do you mean, you don't know? Were there other boys?'

'Give me a chance!'

'I'm not being nosey, Kid! I'm sorry for that boy! I suppose I'm usually sorry for people whose misdeeds have caught up with them. I like them to get another chance . . . That's not to say I agree with what you two got up to. I don't. Things like that are best left alone till you're old enough to cope.'

I saw a white disk in the sky. It excited me.

'Look!'

'Hush! That's only the moon!'

'But it's not bright like the moon! It looks as thin as paper!'

'That's what we call the naughty girls' moon. The more often you see it, the more beauty sleep you've lost and, I suppose, the more naughty you are. But, listen, I haven't come to talk about the moon though I've lost some of my beauty sleep for your sake. Can I get a message to that boy? If you tell me his name and address, I'll get my boy friend to take a note to him.'

I couldn't bring myself to tell her. I said :

'I don't know.'

She got up, annoyed.

'Well, serves me right for interfering, doesn't it?'

I didn't answer. Questions . . . more questions . . . months of questions . . . even now the baby was born and everything was fixed, more questions.

'You're a stupid girl, Kathleen! You have to trust somebody in your life! But why should I worry? Don't imagine you can change your mind. My boy friend leaves home at seven. If I

don't telephone him by six-thirty, I've had it . . . and, unfortunately, your young man will have had it too.'

She waited while I traced the bumps on my counterpane.

'Are you keen on this boy? Because, if you are, you've got a funny way of showing it.' She was getting more annoyed. 'My God! What do I get out of this but annoyance? O.K. Play it your way. But don't expect any other help from me. I've wasted too much thought on you these past few days as it is. I must say you're quite the most stubborn case I've met!'

She said a lot of other things, but I didn't listen. I thought: if it's going to be as bad as she says it is, I'll run away as soon as she's gone, and then I shan't ever have to answer another question! All the while she was talking, I could see myself running away. If they caught me in the hospital, I could say I was going to the toilet. That was easy. But outside the hospital, I wouldn't get far in a wincey nightdress, open down the back. I hadn't even got my dressing-gown! That was in the ward by my bed. . . .

Nurse Brown went at last, and I stretched again to find cool places. There were so few left that each discovered spot was as satisfying as the first gulp at an ice-cold drink on a hot day.

I AWOKE to the sound of scrubbing. It was day, and yet the thin slither of the moon still rode the sky. I felt comforted when I remembered that Nurse Brown had called it the 'naughty girls' moon'. Nurse Brown liked me. Nurse Brown liked Johnny . . . The thoughts made me drowsy.

And then I sat up. Johnny! She had wanted to get a message to Johnny to save him from Borstal! And I wouldn't let her! I ought to have let her stop Johnny from coming, but I wanted Johnny to come. I wanted Johnny to bring me things. He might even bring me a crash helmet . . . a white one like Janet's . . . I could picture him coming in with it, in a brown paper bag looking a great awkward gawp. . . .

I seemed to see him walking towards me with the helmet, and then I knew what would happen . . . Police would pop out from all the doors, and they'd take him off to Borstal, and they wouldn't even let him give me the hat. . . .

I jumped out of bed. I had got to save Johnny. He mustn't come to the hospital again. He must wait at the Caff till I came out. He could buy the helmet and keep it. . . .

I cried in sudden rage because I had no slippers and no dressing-gown. I didn't care. I had got to get downstairs to the

telephone box. I could ring the Caff. Bill would give Larry Pearce a message, and Larry would see Johnny. Johnny always went to the Caff after work because his mother was at work and his tea wasn't ready till seven.

Plumb at the top of the stairs, an enormously fat woman in a green overall was scrubbing the marble landing.

'Hullo!' she said.

I didn't answer. I stood there remembering the gaping night-dress, my feet bare, waiting for her to let me pass.

'Didn't you ought to have a dressing-gown and slippers on, Ducky? Not that I've ever possessed a dressing-gown in me life! I've always had to get out of bed, get into my clothes, and get into the bus . . . Laugh! I'm taking hair curlers out with one hand, and shoving bread into me gob with the other! Mind you, I always have a good hot wash when I get home. There's nothing like a good hot wash when you've been sweating, and I do sweat. It pours off me!'

She got up stiffly and was moving her bucket when she stared up at me again:

'I say! I've just come to! Where do you think you're off to?'

'I want to go to the toilet,' I said.

'Took short, like?' she said, staring hard at me.

'Please let me get by. I'm in a hurry.'

'I bet you are, Ducks . . . And I reckon I'd be in a hurry if Sister found out I'd let you pass without even your slippers on! Not that I care about Sister. I do my work, and she can take it out of that. Proper pig she is . . . Don't even pass the time of day with you! I always say she's been reading too many of them books where the nurse marries the doctor, and it's swelled her head for her!' I tried to get between the bucket and the banister. 'No you don't! You tell me the truth! You're not going to no toilet, because there's one right opposite. . . .'

'Please let me go. I want to telephone someone. It's urgent!'

'Ah! That's more like it. Your boy friend, eh? I had a boy friend once . . . You wouldn't think it to look at me now,

would you? I look as if I'm five months gone front, back, sides and middle, don't I? No such luck !'

'Can I go now, please?' I begged.

'I ought to say no, but I never was good at saying no . . . and I'm glad now I wasn't . . . You're not running away, are you Lovey?'

'No.'

'Swear it?'

'Yes.'

'Cos that wouldn't help . . . Tell you what? See that door there? That one . . . Nip in there and pinch a green overall and put it over your nightie. More respectable . . . And you'll find an old pair of flatties for your feet. And if anyone sees you, they'll think you're only a cleaner.' She let me pass, and she shook with excitement when I came out of the door she had pointed to, tying up a green overall.

'Tuck up your nightdress! That's it! Give him my love!' I was going down the next flight of steps when she called: 'I say! You got the coppers?'

'Coppers?'

'Yes . . . Four pennies you'll want.'

'I haven't got any money . . . I didn't think. . . .'

She came downstairs, dipping into her overall pocket, and handed me four pennies.

'See? You can't do without fat Bessie after all, can you? Now admit it. I don't look quite so fat now I've given you the money, do I?'

I didn't know what to say, because her small face was still mounted on two rolls of very white flesh. She slapped my behind.

'Go on!' she said. 'Ring your boy friend and give him Bessie's love . . . And be nice to him. Be glad you got the opportunity to be nice to him. You don't always have it.'

I groped my way downstairs, through the corridor that seemed to stretch for ever, into the hall. The porter eyed me.

'Sister sent me to telephone,' I said.

'Which sister?'

'E.3.'

'Wouldn't let you use her 'phone, I suppose?'

'No.'

'Some will. Some won't. E.3's got a power complex, that's her trouble. If you could use her phone, you'd be as good as her, wouldn't you?'

I said 'Yes' and shot into the box and pulled the door to. I'm good at reading, good at most things really, but it took hours—or it seemed hours—to find the telephone number of the Caff. I got terribly het up. I was suddenly fond of Johnny, and I'd have died if anything happened to him. He was better looking than any of the other boys at the Caff, better looking than Larry Pearce; and now he'd got a new Norton, he'd drive me faster than sound, and I'd be in the centre of an absolute hell of noise, and when we crashed and the noise had stopped, I wouldn't know because I'd be dead.

I dialled the number. Bill answered:

'Yeah?'

'Is that you Bill?'

'I hope so, or someone else has been at my till this morning.'

'This is Kathleen. . . .'

'Thanks for ringing.'

'No, listen Bill. This is urgent. I want to get a message to Johnny. . . .'

'I know lots of Johnnys. . . .'

'Bill . . . It's me . . . Kathleen. . . .'

'I heard you say that. But I don't know you, Kathleen. But you sound like a blonde with a 36 bust. Am I right?'

'Bill! For God's sake listen! If you don't know Kathleen Purslowe, and you don't know Johnny Park, you must know Larry Pearce . . . ?'

'Oh . . . Johnny *Park* . . . the Norton boy? Why didn't you say so? And you're Kathleen . . . the little blonde they were all sold on! But you haven't been along lately, Kathleen. . . .'

'Listen, Bill . . . I want you to tell Johnny Park **NOT** to come to the hospital tonight.'

'Wait a minute: I'll write it down. Which hospital?'

'He'll know . . . But make sure he doesn't come, won't you, Bill? Tell him it's dangerous.'

'Why, have they got smallpox, or something?'

'They're not sure, but it's dangerous whatever it is. Promise you'll tell him, Bill! Say I'll come to the Caff and see him. . . .'

'Here, hold on a minute, Kathleen! You're not coming near the Caff if you've been in contact with smallpox or anything like it?'

'They only *think* it's smallpox, Bill. It's probably something quite different. . . .'

'I'm not taking any chances. I've got my living to think of.'

'Bill, listen! It's *not* smallpox. It's the police.'

'Come clean. . . .'

'I am coming clean, Bill. But don't let him come to the hospital, will you?'

'Because of the police?'

'Yes.'

'What's the Norton boy done?'

'Nothing.'

'I said "come clean", didn't I?'

'He hasn't done anything, honest, Bill. . . .'

' . . . But the police want a job, so they're looking for somebody that hasn't done nothing. Here, what say you come round here and have a cosy chat with me?'

'I can't, Bill. I'm in hospital.'

'Oh . . . I get you now . . . This Norton boy punched you up the throat, or something, and. . . .'

I saw Sister coming towards the box.

'Bill! They've got me. Tell Larry Pearce. Tell him . . . Goodbye. . . .'

Sister flung open the door.

'What do you think you're doing?'

'Nothing.'

'Why didn't you ask me if you wanted to use the telephone?'

'I didn't think you'd let me.'

'What number were you phoning?'

'It's . . . it's in the book. It's the Mother and Baby Home, where I was . . . I wanted some of my things. . . .'

'Go back to your bed, and put that overall back where you found it! Really! I'm beginning to feel like a mental nurse. I'll have to have you moved to a place where you can be under observation all the time. . . .'

We had reached E.3 ward.

'Please let me go into the ward. I won't say anything to anyone. But in that room there are only the walls to look at. . . .'

'And just as well, too, that there are only walls.'

I lay on my bed and cried loudly. Sister came in and shook me, and said she had had enough of my nonsense, so I screamed, and I could see it frightened her and she left in a hurry. Nurse Brown came in.

'Kathleen! Stop this at once! You're putting it on! What's the trouble? Pull yourself together, for God's sake. You'll be sent to the Observation Ward if you're not careful! Get into bed . . . right in. Now let me put the pillows straight . . . Come on, let me wipe your face over. That's better, isn't it?'

She straightened my bed and tucked me in so that I could hardly move.

'Sister caught you telephoning, didn't she? Well, that's not a crime, and unless you kick up the kind of row you were just kicking up, she can't do a thing to you but bleat . . . So why all the fuss? Were you telephoning the boy?'

'No. He hasn't got a phone. I telephoned the Caff—you know, the cafe—where he goes.'

'Suppose he doesn't go there?'

'He will. He always does. . . .'

'You're a silly girl, aren't you? Why didn't you trust me to get a message to him, eh? It would have saved all this bother, wouldn't it? You must trust somebody some time, mustn't you? Well, it's all over . . . We'll get a nice breakfast, eh?'



When she came in with my tray, I was crying.

‘What is it now?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know. I was thinking of Johnny . . . I won’t see him again, will I? They might put me somewhere when I get out of here where I can’t get to the Caff, and. . . .’

She said: ‘Live for today, Kid. . . .’

She patted my cheek, and when she went to the door she look at me as if she loved me. And after that, I couldn’t eat anything.

## I I

I FELT trapped in that room. I got out of bed. I got back into bed. I sobbed softly. I got up again. I walked round the room. I tried to open the window, but it was wedged.

The doctor came to see me—the young one that patted my cheek when nobody was looking and sometimes winked at me when he was supposed to be telling me off. Sister came with him. She was all smiles.

‘She has been a very naughty girl, Doctor,’ Sister said.

Doctor took my wrist, and winked.

‘Where’s the pain?’ he asked.

‘I haven’t got a pain.’

‘That’s fine! And why have you been upsetting Sister?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Well, don’t do it again, will you? Or we shall have to put you on a charge. . . .’ Again he winked. ‘We’ll see her down at the Clinic, Sister . . . Shove her on the trolley.’

‘Yes, Doctor. . . .’

‘Be as good as you can, Kathleen . . . Talk to someone about things . . . Isn’t there someone you can talk to?’

I wanted to talk to him, but Sister’s smile put me off saying so.

He smiled, and I saw that his teeth were very white and even. I lay back after he had gone, feeling happy because I knew he liked me. I made believe that he came back, and sat on my bed, and held my hand, and told me that he had been waiting for this moment, and that I would never have to worry again all my life because he would take care of me. He told me where we were going that night as soon as Sister was off duty . . . It wasn't to the Caff. He said the Caff wasn't good enough for me. He said he would take me to a place where there were palms in pots, and two wide staircases that curled to meet. And where there were waiters, and women with strapless evening dresses. Of course my evening dress was strapless.

I wasn't asleep, I know. I was just day-dreaming. But Miss Achesson said I was asleep. She had been sitting there for some while. She said she was sorry to hear I had had to be isolated because of my behaviour. She said it was inexcusable what I had done to Mrs Connolly, and it would be no more than was to be expected if Mrs Connolly resorted to police action.

'But about this boy who visits you . . . Who is he?'

'I don't know.'

'Now, Kathy. . . .'

'It's just someone I picked up at the Mother and Baby Home. He knows one of the girls there and. . . .'

'He's *not* the father of your child?'

'How can he be?'

'No . . . of course he can't. You've been very consistent in your story. But the way to protect an innocent party like this young boy is to tell the truth, Kathleen. This lorry driver, aged thirty, employed on the Birmingham run, furniture. . . .'

I didn't listen to Miss Achesson. I watched her. I couldn't see her eyes properly. The light from the window was reflected in her glasses and caught the tip of her nose and her chin and two spots on her forehead. She had nice hands. I'll say that for her. The fingers were long, the nails pointed and lacquered a lovely red.

'Well? Is there anything you want to say?'

What did I want to say? 'What's the good of having lovely nails when you wear those horrible glasses?' That was what I wanted to say. Her answer would certainly be: 'Don't be rude, Kathleen! Making personal remarks won't help us, will it?' I was dying to say it to her, just to see if she would use exactly those words.

'This is very regrettable, Kathleen . . . And the more so, because I can't help feeling you're deteriorating . . . I mean, early reports of you suggest a polite, unsophisticated grammar school girl of fourteen. And now there's this. . . .'

I lay back. Now I could only see the unhindered light reflected in the pebbles. I pretended nothing was behind them, and that the voice I could hear was the voice of my doctor, telling me again not to worry about anything because as soon as I got out of hospital he would take care of me. He couldn't do anything while I was in hospital, could he? He couldn't even tuck me in and kiss me goodnight though he badly wanted to.

Miss Achesson waved her hand in front of me.

'Kathleen! Do please stop day dreaming! Do pay attention. We must get things settled. Mrs Sleeman-Evans came to see you, I understand?'

'Did she?'

'Kathleen! She came to see you two days ago. She was sent by the adoption society to take care of your baby until you decide upon adoption. Now do you remember? The day you are discharged, Mrs Sleeman-Evans will take the baby, and I will take you back to Prenderfold House to collect your belongings. We'll go through your clothing together, and make your wardrobe up to standard . . . You'll enjoy that, won't you? I shall. I always enjoy outfitting my girls. They can look so very nice . . . such a credit to the Department. You must be thinking what sort of things you'd like . . . You'll need quite a few clothes, I'm sure . . . After all, you've only had schoolgirl clothing up to now, haven't you?' Her lips smiled for a long time, though I still couldn't see her eyes . . . 'You won't find I'm old-fashioned, Kathleen! I like the modern styles for young

girls . . . You could look very nice, you know. Your hair is quite delightful . . . How tall are you, by the way? Funny, isn't it, but I've never seen you standing !'

I nearly said I couldn't see the joke, but that might have stopped her talking. I wanted her to talk. I didn't have to listen. I could dream. I could get to the part where my doctor was telling me where he would take me when I was discharged from hospital. His car would be waiting outside, of course, a little white one with a long nose and the hood down, and he would go so fast I wouldn't be able to breathe, and. . . .

It didn't work. I couldn't get right into it. I kept hearing what Miss Achesson was saying, and several times I had to bite my tongue or I'd have said : 'Change the record'. And I kept seeing Johnny. He was staring at the baby through the glass screen like a kid with no money staring at a windowful of sweets. Well, he wouldn't get me staring at it. He could do the staring. He could stare for ever if he liked . . . No, he couldn't, though . . . Mum said that Mrs Sleeman-Evans was going to take the baby away . . . Johnny would come to stare one evening, and the baby would be gone !

Miss Achesson was still on the subject of clothing. She knew I wouldn't want to wear any of the clothing I had worn while I was pregnant . . . too painful a reminder, eh? She thought a pinafore dress was a good buy, a very useful addition to any wardrobe.

'I don't want the baby to go,' I interrupted.

Her spectacles became eyes, monster's eyes, frightening if you let yourself be caught by them.

'What on earth are you talking about, Kathleen? Of course the baby's going ! That was all arranged between your mother and Miss Hamson before I took over ! I must say you're unpredictable. You haven't shown the slightest interest in the baby up till now. The sister feels that the less interest you are encouraged to take the better as most likely the baby is being adopted right away. But even she has been surprised at your lack of interest. . . .' For Miss Achesson that part of the conversation

was finished. She settled more comfortably. 'Now, where were we? . . . Oh yes! We'd settled on a shortie raincoat, not too light in colour because they're never so satisfactory when cleaned; a Gorrays skirt and two twin sets to tone; and I thought a pinafore dress in that lovely cherry red?'

I hadn't realized how much Johnny liked the baby . . . I could see his face now as he told me about it. His teeth were just as even and just as white as my doctor's, and Johnny moved his lips in a nice way when he spoke. Johnny wanted the baby. He would mind a lot when it went.

Miss Achesson's lenses were turned now so that I could see her eyes. It was easier to talk to her.

'I don't want the baby to go,' I repeated.

She bounced off the stool and bent over me :

'Now listen, Kathleen . . . Of course the baby must go. It has all been arranged, and you agreed. But nothing is final for a long time. If, after you've recovered, you decide you don't want the baby to go, nobody is going to force you. But do for goodness sake think of the baby! A baby needs mothering. This Mrs Sleeman-Evans will give it a grand chance, a far, far better chance that it would have in nurseries where it belongs to no one.'

'I could give it to someone who wants it. . . .'

'You can't give a baby away just like that!'

'Why can't I? It's my baby, isn't it? I had it, didn't I? And I'm going to do what I like with it, and you can't stop me! Nobody can! It's mine!'

She lost patience with me. Her lenses flashed, her lips seemed to dance, and I could see long fair hairs on the upper lip. I hadn't noticed them before. I thought : someone ought to tell you about those . . . You ought to get them plucked . . . If I told you, you'd say I was being personal or rude or something. . . .

Nurse Brown interrupted whatever it was that Miss Achesson was saying.

'Sorry to interrupt you, but Kathleen is due at the post natal

in a few minutes . . . The trolley's here.'

Miss Achesson sighed :

'Of course, Nurse, of course . . . I'll come back some other time. I don't know how you find Kathleen, Nurse, but. . . '

I heard no more. They were already passing the kitchen.

I TOLD Nurse Brown I wanted to go to the toilet before going to the clinic.

'Better hang on to it, Sweetheart, in case they want a sample!' she said. 'And you'd better run a comb through that hair of yours, or they'll think you've escaped from a looney ward.'

I ran into the main ward and all the way down to my locker. It was feeding time. Most of the babies were at the breast, the mothers quieter than usual, some of them saying daft things to the babies.

Mrs Connolly was there. I didn't at first look at her face. I just saw the three blobs—one of them clipped between two fingers. I thought, all the other mothers only uncover one breast at a time. She has to uncover two. Then I had a quick look at her eye, and I was disappointed at what I had done. It wasn't black at all. It was just a little bit yellowy-green.

'Lot of liars!' I thought. 'The way they all talked, anyone would have thought I had pulped one half of her face!' I went to my locker to get my make-up. Mrs Connolly didn't speak, but her eyes darted every time I so much as moved. I sat on my bed while I scrabbled in my locker; and I had a sudden feeling



that I had come home after a very long time. It felt good, and I slowed down the scrabbling so that I could enjoy myself. This was where I belonged. There were things to see, to hear, doors to watch in case someone went in or came out, a table in the centre covered with flowers.

'It's like the top of a coffin on the way there!' Mrs Prince had shouted once.

All the same women were there doing the same things in the same way to the same babies—at least, they thought they were the same babies, I couldn't tell the difference from the little I had seen of them . . . I glanced out of the window . . . Yes, and there outside was the top of the tree I had made up my mind I would climb the minute I was free . . . And there on the far side of the ward was the funny little wizened woman that you wouldn't have believed anyone would have married and whose arm shot up every time anyone looked at her and shouted: 'Oo-oo-oo! How are yer this morning?'

As if the wizened one had read my thoughts, an arm shot up and a voice cried:

'Oo-oo-oo! How are yer this morning?'

'O.K.' I shouted.

Mrs Midgeley called:

'Are they going to let you come back?'

Mrs Connolly snatched her breast from the baby, sat up high and glared.

'If they let her come back, I'm discharging myself, and that's flat! I'd never sleep in peace with her around! You be me, Mrs Midgeley! You have a wild animal spring at you, and see how you like it! I've had a headache ever since, and it has upset my milk as well!'

Even after all that, it still felt like home. I wanted to come back. I wanted it more than anything.

'Please!' I said. 'I'm sorry I lost my temper. . . .'

'And so you should be! I shall never forget it, not as long as I live! I've been in and out of hospital all my married life, and I've never had so much as a cross word from anybody.' She

~~Began~~ to cry, tears that ran swiftly down her cheeks and on to the baby's head. 'I don't know why you should choose me! I was only wanting to save you! I've got a daughter as old as you, and I was thinking of you as a daughter who had to be shielded. You don't know men like I do. I've got a good husband, one of the best, but. . . .'

'I don't call a man a good husband who gives a woman nine kids as fast as she can carry them AND thinks he's doing God's work!' Mrs. Prince shouted. 'You must spend your life on your back, either doing it, having it, or getting over it! You wouldn't catch me being a Roman Catholic!'

Mrs Connolly's tears must have felt like heavy rain to the baby. Her chest heaved with sobs.

Sister came into the ward from the near end.

'What is happening in here? What is the matter, Mrs Connolly?' She saw me. 'It's you again, is it? Who told you to come into this ward?'

'Why pick on me?'

'Get into your own room at once! Nurse! Nurse! Take this girl off to her own room and please PLEASE see that she doesn't come into this ward upsetting our mothers again. . . .'

I tossed my head and went up the ward in front of Nurse Brown saying 'Bitch!'

'It wasn't the little girl's fault, Sister!' Mrs Prince shouted. 'It was mine.'

'I don't care whose fault it was. I won't have this sort of thing. You'll please leave each other alone if you can't be friendly. Now, come on, Mrs Connolly! Pull yourself together! You're still in one piece!'

The funny little wizened woman shot her arm into the air as we passed and shouted:

'Oo-oo-oo! How are yer?'

'You were supposed to be at the post natal, Kathleen!' Nurse Brown complained. 'The trolley came for you and I sent it away. You had better get there quickly, and comb that hair!'

I shot into the bathroom, and began combing my hair. It

was pretty, as they had said. It wasn't quite straight and yet it wasn't curly, and it was almost white in front. I moved my head about so that I could see the stripe of light moving from side to side. I would move my head when I saw 'my' doctor in the post natal. He would smile and I would know he had seen the light . . . I put some powder on my face, then colour and lipstick and a line of blue eye shadow. I looked quite different, much older, much nearer the age of the girl my doctor would go out with.

Nurse Brown was in the hall of E.3.

'What on earth have you done to your face?' she asked.

'Nothing. . . .'

'I shouldn't let Sister see that make-up if I were you. She's got a thing about make-up. Mind you, it's no real concern of hers, but you're only a schoolgirl, and she has probably got some extra rights over you. Take it off, Sweetheart!'

'What make up? I haven't got any make-up on!'

'It doesn't suit you, Lovey! I'm not against make-up, God knows. I treat my boy friend to the lot, including strip eye-lashes if we're going anywhere special. But I do it so cleverly that he'd swear his life away that I'm just a natural . . . Now, you look as if you've bought from every beautician in America and smacked the lot on regardless. Tell you what, you take that lot off now, and the day you go out I'll make you up so no one will know and yet they'll have to stare. How's that?'

I went back to the bathroom and stared at myself in the glass. The light on my hair looked better than ever, and my face looked all right to me. Perhaps my eye-shadow was a bit too greeny for my eyes . . . and the pink on my lips wasn't all that bright. But I wanted my doctor to see me all glamorous for once. He liked me a lot. He wouldn't wink at me if he didn't. He might like me even more than I thought. He might be waiting for me to get older before telling me . . . Or he might mind about the baby. Mum had said no decent man would ever marry me now I had had a baby. . . .

I peered out of the bathroom. Nurse Brown wasn't there.

Swiftly, I passed the kitchen, ran down the stairs as if the devil were after me, and collided with a white coated porter.

'Ward on fire?' he asked.

'No . . . I'm supposed to be at post natal.'

He stared. 'You did say post natal?'

'Yes.'

'You know it's where mothers go after their babies are born?'

'Mine is nearly a week old,' I said.

'You'll be telling me you're seventy next birthday in a minute . . . Well . . . well . . . You said it. Post natal is right at the far end of the corridor where that purple light is flicking now . . . See it?'

I went slowly along the corridor, feeling free. I wasn't in hospital at all. I was out for a walk along the promenade . . . wearing white stiletto-heeled shoes and . . . well, the rest didn't matter. There was a silver path across the sea, with the great low moon at the end of it. I was thinking how lovely it looked, and he—my doctor—was thinking how lovely it looked too, only he was meaning the moonlight on my hair, of course. He was touching my arm. His fingers were warm . . . no cool like the spots in my bed. . . .

The flashing purple light grew nearer. He would be there, waiting for me, wondering why I was so long. He would say . . . No, it would be the nurse who would say: 'Slip your things off and lie on your side. . . .' And he would come in and . . . No! I wouldn't like that! I'd die if he saw me like that!

I took fright. I turned and ran as fast as I could back to E.3. Nurse Brown was in my room.

'You've been quick! Why, what's wrong. . . .'

'I feel sick!'

'You didn't go?'

'I couldn't. I felt sick. I was sick. . . .'

She opened the bed.

'Get in! You should have gone on the trolley. What we're going to do with you I don't know!'

WEDNESDAY afternoon was visiting afternoon. Miss Achesson had brought me to hospital just a week previously. I had been terrified then of what they would do to me, and I got out of Miss Achesson's car outside the hospital and began running down the street, sobbing. Of course I didn't get far.

The first nurse I saw on being admitted said :

'Don't you know what this afternoon is? It's Wednesday afternoon, visiting afternoon. If you're a sensible girl, you'll time it to be all over by two o'clock when they pour in with their favourite flowers and fruit.'

That all seemed a long while ago, part of another life, when I had a welfare officer called Miss Hamson, when someone was always at me trying to find out 'the father', when my back was almost broken in two.

This Wednesday afternoon, Nurse Brown put Johnny's flowers on my locker. She washed my face, and made it up so that, as she said : 'Even Sherlock Holmes with his spyglass couldn't be dead sure.' When she had finished with me, she went over to the door and pretended she was just coming in.

'I'm not kidding !' she said. 'It knocks you back ! You look

absolutely cute! I'm glad my boy friend isn't around. You'd break his heart, especially when you look uncertain like you do now . . . I'll leave the door open wide, shall I? And then all the visitors can have an eyeful. . . .'

I said: 'I shan't have a visitor.'

She said: 'You never know. Doctor might pop in.'

I thought she meant it. I said: 'Honest?'

'It's not fair to tease you, is it? No, he won't be around again today, not unless you throw a fit, and even then Dr Floyd would probably come, and all your beauty would be wasted on her . . . I must go now. But I'll be back. And someone will visit you . . . Sure to. Keep smiling!'

People passed my door, happy people, sad people, rich-looking ones and others who looked poor. They all had bunches of flowers or bags of fruit and brown paper parcels of clean washing. But none of them came to see me.

At first, I didn't care. I had conversations with my doctor. He said his mother was dying to meet me, couldn't wait . . . He said he had mentioned me to the butler, who would call me 'Miss Kathleen' until the wedding. He said his twin sisters wanted to wear pink at the wedding, ballerina length, and posies of . . . yes, it was anemones with every colour you could think of.

But then I got annoyed at being left alone. What about Miss Achesson? Why didn't she come and talk about clothes, and the baby going . . . ? She could talk about anything under the sun so long as she came.

What about Mum? She wouldn't come. I didn't want her, anyway.

The people still passed my door. I pretended Johnny was among them. He had got the white crash helmet, of course. He had got my message, but he had had to come because . . . Johnny got mixed up with my doctor because I made him say: 'I had to come because you are so devastating.' That was all wrong for Johnny.

A man came to the door and played a rat-tat on it, although it was open and he could see me.

'Anyone at home?'

I recognized him as Mrs Midgeley's husband, her Jack. He pulled out my stool and sat down and then handed me a large bag of sweets.

'With my wife's love,' he said. 'I'm not allowed to give pretty girls presents myself.'

The sweets lay on my counterpane while I stared at the man. He looked terribly old-fashioned to me. He took out a packet of cigarettes and fidgetted with them.

'Mind if I smoke?'

'Do what you like.'

'I bet you smoke.'

I didn't answer. It seemed such a silly thing to say. It went with his navy blue suit, and his bristly chin and his big ugly nose. Mrs Midgeley called him 'My Jack' as if he was Cliff Richard. She made all the other women scream with laughter when she wore her pink brushed-nylon nightie and said: 'For my Jack!' and fluttered her eyelashes. She said she didn't mind admitting it: she was more than ever in love with 'My Jack'. Some women told her to wait till she was in for her fifth, and see if she still loved him as much. . . .

Mrs Midgeley's Jack said:

'What are you looking at me like that for, Kid? You look as if you don't like much what you see! And why should you? I'm no glamour-boy, never was, though Beryl saw something in me, still does, bless her cotton socks!' He spread his hands out on his fat knees. 'There's no doubt about it, being happily married is worth all the rest . . . You can't beat it. You lose your freedom, granted. You can't come out of the factory and get on your chugger and go down to the sea like I did before I knew Beryl. I was a devil for the sea . . . Still would be, but . . . When you're married, you've got to go home, and wash and change and have a meal, and take the dog for a run, and put a new band on the cleaner . . . Women can't do

things on the spur of the moment. They worry about what you're going to eat, and because it's the insurance man's night to call, and. . . .' He stopped suddenly, and stared at the sweets. 'Aren't you going to eat any of your sweets?'

'You eat one,' I offered.

'Not me! They're for you. I bought them for you. Beryl told me to, of course.'

'Didn't you ought to go back to Beryl?'

'Bored with me?'

'No.'

'You don't want to worry about Beryl. She'll be just as happy if I sit here with you. Beryl's happy so long as she knows just where I am. It's when I'm a bit late getting home that Beryl tears her hair. She'd almost rather know I was dead than not know where I am. . . .'

He sat smiling at the floor, seeing Beryl I suppose.

'Yes,' he sighed. 'It's worth it all, worth giving up the sudden jaunts to the sea, the odd pint, the fun and games with a girl you've never seen before and wouldn't want to see again. And now I've got a daughter!' His blue eyes were watery. 'You wouldn't know what that does to a man, especially one as old and ugly as yours truly!' He poked my shoulder. 'Go on. Say I'm not ugly, you whopper!'

I felt awkward, so I opened the bag of sweets and took a long time to make up my mind if I would have a dark purple one or one of the greens.

'Mind you, I never wanted a kid! Never! Too messy! It was Beryl who was kid mad, taking pills, haunting the doctor over it till I said to her: "You want to watch out, or the old wotsit will be offering to be the father!" Laugh! But seriously, she couldn't eat, sleep or drink for waiting for this kid. And now it's there behind that glass screen, *my* kid! And now I can't eat or sleep or drink for thinking of it! Can you beat it?'

I offered him a sweet and he took it without looking down.

'I went into the canteen the day it put in an appearance, and I thought: "This isn't me! It's not Jack Midgeley! It's



daddy!" And I made such a fool of myself in front of all the fellows. . . .' He shook his head several times. 'Still, they're a decent lot. They won't hold it against me.'

He was silent for so long, his eyes lowered, that I thought he had gone to sleep.

'You know what Beryl's latest is? She wants to call our baby "Kathleen" after you. It's a fact! Kathleen . . . Katy. . . .' He began to sing: 'K.k.k.Katy, beautiful Katy, da-de-da-de-da-de-da-de-da!' and he poked my shoulder.

'Oo! Aren't you serious? Not a smile out of you! You're looking at me with such an old-fashioned look on your face! But straight. What do you think of Kathleen for a name?'

'I don't like it.'

'Don't you? I suppose you're going to call yours Marilyn, or Brigitte, or something, eh?' He stared at me. 'Let me into the secret: what are you calling yours?'

'Nothing.'

'Now I like that! Nothing Midgeley . . . Well, at least nobody will have that name, will they?' He nudged me. 'Come on, Kathleen, spill the beans. What's your baby's name? I won't tell a soul if you don't want me to, not even Beryl.'

His ugly, smiling face came nearer to mine as he waited for the answer. I didn't like him when he poked me and nudged me and put his face near mine. He was ugly. I didn't see how anybody could have married him.

'Come on!' he coaxed. 'Tell your Uncle! Whisper it!' And he put his silly fat face close to mine. I suddenly kicked my legs so that the sweets flew in all directions.

'Mind your own business!' I shouted.

He stood up, his eyes travelling from the dark purple sweet by the door to the white one by his feet.

'I'm sorry! I was only joking! The last thing I wanted was to upset you, straight it was! I didn't really want to know . . . I just wanted to make you talk, that's all, instead of sitting there as if someone had struck you dumb!' He held out his hand: 'Shake, Kid! I wouldn't upset you for worlds! If I could help

you, I would . . . We've taken a fancy to you, Beryl and me have . . . You believe that?'

He looked such a fool with his outsize hand stuck out. I wanted to take it, but I daren't. All I could do was to throw myself down on my pillow and sob.

Nurse Brown came in. Perhaps they said something to each other. I couldn't hear.

'Don't worry, Mr Midgeley, don't give it another thought. I should go to your wife, and leave the little silly to get over it!'

This time, Nurse Brown closed the door.

I FELT miserable on Wednesday evening. There was nobody to talk to, and every time Sister or Nurse Wallace came into the room, they moaned because they trod on one of 'My Jack's' sweets. There were no evening visitors on Wednesday, because they should have come in the afternoon.

I stared at the flat cream walls until I could have screamed. I tried reading, but I was so churned up inside that I could take nothing in, although 'South Riding' was a book I loved. I tried make-believe. But even that didn't work.

My doctor didn't give a damn about me! If his life depended on it, he wouldn't be able to remember if my hair was red, green or sky-blue pink! He would never take me out in his car, not if he was on a desert island and I was the only girl there. And as for letting his mother or the butler meet me. . . .'

I thought of Johnny. I had told Johnny not to come, but he ought to come all the same. It was his baby, wasn't it?

Nurse Brown came in. She said :

'My! We do look miserable! You look as if somebody's snatched your lolly away! What are all these sweets on the floor for? We'd better pick these up before Sister sees them. She's fed up with you to begin with, and if she sees these. . . .'

She stooped and picked up some of the sweets and put them into the waste-paper basket.

'I'm just off duty. I thought I'd look in to see you're comfortable.' She stood staring at me. 'You're a poor wee kid, aren't you? What are we going to do about you, eh? I don't mind telling you you worry me. You're like a leaf blown about in the wind somehow. Look . . . What's going to happen to you when we discharge you from here? Will your mother have you?'

'I don't know. I don't suppose so.'

'My God! What's a mother for if it's not to stand by you in trouble? I can't understand people. Don't they ever say: "There but for the grace of God . . ."?' Oh well, let's be practical. If you don't go home to yo'r mother, where will you go? Not surely back to the Mother and Baby Home if your baby's gone?'

Nurse Brown dived under my bed and brought out more sweets.

I shrugged my shoulders.

'One girl in the Mother and Baby Home is going back to her Children's home after her baby is adopted. She had got used to them. She had lived there since she could remember. And then she had to leave when she was fifteen, like you do. They put her into a hostel where you could go out at night. She met a bus conductor and had a baby, and he swore it wasn't his, but she said it was. He's in prison. He says he'll kill her when he comes out. She thinks he will, too. Isn't that exciting?'

Nurse Brown got annoyed about the sweets.

'I don't know why I'm scrabbling about down here! I must be losing my grip! Here! Get out of that bed and pick up the rest of the sweets! Fancy ruining all those sweets! If you didn't want them, why didn't you give them to someone else?'

Sister appeared carrying a white crash helmet, a beauty, the shape I had always wanted and it had 'Stirling Moss' written right across it. Sister looked such a fool carrying it as if it was an overflowing pot.

'Having trouble, Nurse?' Sister asked.

'No, Sister. I accidentally knocked these sweets off Kathleen's bed.'

'Whose crash helmet is that?' I asked.

'You don't deserve to know,' Sister said.

'Is it mine? Did Johnny send it? Where is he? Let me see him!' I snatched the helmet out of her hands. 'It's mine! You can't keep it from me!'

'I can give it back to this Johnny, whoever he is, and say you can't have it here!'

'Is Johnny here? Where is he? Let me see him! Please Sister! I'll do anything you say. Please let me see him! I've got to. It's important. I shall be ill if I don't!'

'There's no visiting this evening,' Sister said.

'Let him just come to the door so I can wave to him, please!'

Sister turned her back on me.

'Get her tidied up, Nurse!'

'Yes, Sister!'

'She can see this person for a few minutes, but he must be gone by the time Night Sister comes on.'

'Of course, Sister!'

I wanted to thank Sister, but she didn't look at me. She went out of the room.

Nurse Brown said: 'Let me put the helmet on the window sill. . . .'

'No!' I shouted. 'It's mine! I want it!'

'All right! All right! Mind you, I think your Johnny is mad to come here! Mrs Connolly has already told the Almoner and written a letter to someone in what she calls "Moral Welfare".'

She went outside, leaving me so tidy in bed that I felt as if iron bands were gripping me. The crash helmet lay on the turn-down sheet, looking so glistening and white as to make the sheet seem grey. I fondled the hat. It was mine, my very own. It was proof that Johnny was fond of me.

I looked into the helmet, into its brilliant green lining.

Johnny was at the door with Nurse Brown.

'Only a few minutes, mind! I'll leave the door ajar. My mother always does even now!'

Johnny stood in the middle of the room looking nice but awkward.

'You got the lid?' he said.

'It's lovely, Johnny! Thanks . . . Honestly, I could hug you for it!'

He took it from me, turned it over, examined it.

'Yes, it's the best quality. Don't get killed before I've finished paying for it, will you?'

'I wouldn't mind!'

'I would.' He gave me the helmet. 'Put it on!'

I put it on.

'How does it look?'

He didn't answer. He stared for some seconds.

'Doesn't it suit me, Johnny?'

'Of course it does. Anything would suit you. You've got ever so pretty lately . . . What have you done to your hair?'

'Nothing.'

'It's smashing! Better than Diana Dors's. . . .'

'You're kidding, Johnny!'

'I'm not. I've been thinking about you Kathy. I've been thinking a lot. I want you to go steady with me.'

'Larry Pearce wanted to go steady with me,' I said. 'He asked first.'

Johnny nodded, as if thinking of Larry didn't make him happy.

'Yes, I know . . . I told Larry about the baby last night . . . I had to tell someone. He didn't like it. He went all tight and put all his change in the juke . . . But I don't want to talk about Larry. I want to talk about myself. I want to buy you lots of things, Kathy. . . .'

'D'you know what I'd like you to buy me, Johnny? One of those leather coats—a white one with a fur collar. It would look smashing with this helmet, Johnny, wouldn't it?'

'I'm still paying for my bike.'

'Promise you'll buy it for me, Johnny. . . .'

'I'll try.'

'No. Promise!'

'O.K. I'll promise.'

'When?'

'I don't know. I've got to pay for my bike.'

'I don't want it when I'm nearly ninety! I want it now! Go on, Johnny! I want it for when I come out of here. . . .'

'When's that?'

'Next week . . . Promise!'

'I wanted to buy something for the baby, Kathy!'

'Waste of money!'

'Have you been to see the baby yet?'

'Of course I haven't! Why should I go and see it?'

'You'd die if you really looked at it, Kathy! It's the best of the lot, honest! The others look blue or red in the face and that . . . Ours is . . . well, smashing. . . .'

'Promise you'll get me the white leather coat for when I come out, Johnny!'

'I haven't got the money, Kathy, I haven't, honest!'

'You can get it on the H.P.'

'My dad won't sign the papers. He said I wasn't to have anything more until I'd paid for my bike.'

'D'you let your dad talk to you like that? You're seventeen not seven!'

Johnny bent down and picked up a sweet and offered it to me.

'I don't want the filthy thing!' I said.

He stood there awkwardly for some seconds, the sweet in his hand.

'Put it in the waste-paper basket, you fool!' I said.

He tried to drop it into the basket, but it stuck to his fingers. He looked such a great big idiot, standing there, flicking the sweet. At last it fell into the bin.

'D'you mind if I pop in and see the baby now?' Johnny said.

'You think more of that baby than you do of me!'

'You can't help liking it, Kathy! It's so smashing! I talk to it through the glass. I say: "Look, you little She! It's your daddy watching you!" Proper daft, I am, but I can't help it.' He came and sat down beside me. 'Kathy! We got to keep that baby! We musn't let anyone else have it! It's our baby! I know we can't live with her yet. But we could keep her in a Home and go and see her every Sunday and take her things, and maybe they'd even let us take her out!'

'You want your brains testing, Johnny, straight you do! Didn't Bill give you a message about not coming here any more because of the police?'

'Yes, he did, but I didn't take any notice of that!'

'Well, if you want to go to prison, it's your affair!'

'I don't want to go to prison! I want to keep with you and the baby. I just about burst every time I think of her! It's a wonderful thing having a baby, isn't it?'

'You try it and see!'

'I don't mean that part of it. I'm sorry about that. I mean being its mother and father . . . It's terrific really!'

'You must be nuts! And anyway, it's not yours!'

Johnny got fierce then. It was terribly exciting. He got hold of my wrist and he twisted it and he said:

'What did you say?'

'I said it wasn't yours.'

'You said it was . . . And I feel it was!'

'So it was! But what I mean is that it's only yours if I say it's yours. I could say it was anybody's, couldn't I? And they couldn't prove it wasn't. I could say it was the doctor's. . . .'

Johnny looked so miserable, I laughed.

'You like that baby better than you like me.'

He didn't answer at first. He frowned and shrugged his shoulders.

'It's a different sort of liking.'

'You like the baby better than your Norton?'

He laughed:



'Of course I like it better than the Norton! What a funny idea!'

'So if I said I'd give you my baby if you gave me your Norton, would you?'

'Of course I would, but you couldn't do it!'

'I could. It's my baby. I could say I wanted to keep it. I haven't signed any papers. The girls at the Home said they can't do a thing until you sign the papers.'

'Don't sign any papers *ever*, Kathy! PLEASE! I think I'd die if you signed that baby away for ever. It's so cute! I can't take my eyes off it when I'm there!'

I put my crash helmet on again, and I put my knees up under the bedclothes, and clutched the handlebars of the most powerful motor-bike ever known, and I acted like I was going round a bend with both wheels off the ground. I thought Johnny would laugh, but he wasn't thinking of me. He was thinking of the baby. I leaned against him. I said:

'Promise you'll buy me that white leather coat, Johnny! Go on! Be a sport! I'll pay you back when I'm at work. And I *shall* be at work soon. That Miss Achesson's going to get me a job.'

'I don't want you to pay me back!'

'But I want to pay you back! Please Johnny. . . .'

'I'd buy you anything you wanted, but. . . .'

'I want the white leather coat! Listen, Johnny. . . . If you buy me the white coat, I'll say I don't want the baby to be adopted. . . . Only you'll have to be quick. Because they might come for her any day. . . . tomorrow. . . .'

He stared at me so strangely that I felt frightened.

'You mean that if I get you the white coat by tomorrow, you won't ever let them have the baby?' He caught my wrist so hard that it hurt.

'I shan't answer till you stop hurting my wrist. . . .'

'I'm sorry, Kathy. . . . But will you swear?'

'O.K. I swear!'

'Thank you, Kathy! Thank you!'

Nurse Brown came to the door.

'Haven't you gone? I said a few minutes!'

'I'm sorry!'

'I should think so! For goodness sake sneak past the kitchen so nobody sees you! Really, you two will not only get yourselves hung but you'll get me hung too!'

Johnny was at the door. Nurse half closed the door.

'I shouldn't come again if I were you. I wouldn't really. She'll be out in a few days. But the more you come, the more chance there is that you'll get picked up!'

Nurse was pushing him out of the door.

'Johnny! Don't forget the coat! You could *send* it by tomorrow, couldn't you?'

A WOMAN in the ward whose baby died had to come into my little room, so they moved me back into the ward on Thursday. My bed now was by the swing doors, right away from Mrs Connolly, and Sister forbade me to go down the ward on any pretext whatsoever. Mrs Connolly could come up the ward, though. Every time she went to the bathroom, she passed my bed, and every time she glared at me. I felt uncomfortable, but I didn't let her see that. I stared her out. I would have called her a silly old cow, but I wanted to stay in the main ward, so I often pretended I was asleep when she passed. Sometimes, I was asleep; and I would wake up with a start, and I would know that Mrs Connolly had been staring at me, even if by then she was gone.

But I was happier on Thursday morning. I read my book in snatches, and every so often I took my crash helmet out of my locker and played with it. And I thought a lot about the white leather jacket Johnny was going to buy me. It would have a detachable collar of white nylon fur. I would be able to take the collar off for washing, or if it was hot I could wear the coat without the collar. I wondered when Johnny would buy it. Thursday was late shopping night. He might get it tonight and

bring it! If it wasn't the right size, I'd tell him I would sign the baby away from him. Of course I wouldn't ever now, but Johnny wouldn't be sure, and he'd rush back to the shop.

I could see Mrs Midgeley, looking very strange in outdoor clothes. She was wearing a new dress her Jack had bought her for going home because all her other things were like sacks on her now. The new dress was like a sack on her, too, but she told the ward she would soon put that right once she got at her sewing machine at home. She told the ward that being in hospital with them all had been the happiest time in her life, and she would never forget any of them, not one, and she hoped they would pop in for a cup of tea if they were ever her way. They would always be welcome . . . And as for the nurses . . . well, she couldn't thank them enough for all they had done for her and her little Katy. They had put up with murder from her, and they had put up with all the unpleasantness and never a cross word! She had come into the hospital like a blown-up balloon, and she was going out with the loveliest baby in the world.

She came past my bed dozens of times looking anxiously for her Jack.

'I hope nothing has happened,' she worried. 'He promised to be here before the hospital opened . . . in fact, he didn't want to leave me yesterday, wanted to take me there and then but Sister said no. "Before the hospital opens": those were his very words. He meant to be here by nine o'clock, and here it is nearly half past and no sign of him! And I'll have to feed the baby if he doesn't hurry; and I did want to do that in the baby's room at home!'

... 'Go and make yourself a cup of tea, Mother!' Nurse Peters said. 'For goodness sake don't get so agitated.'

'Perhaps I will make a cup of tea, Nurse, thank you,' Mrs Midgeley agreed, very near tears. 'But I must go round and say goodbye to everybody first.'

And she went from bed to bed, hugging the mothers, crying over them, swearing she would never forget one of them, not if

she lived to be a hundred ! After every few kissings, she would rush up the ward, past the funny little wizened woman's bed, so that a hand shot up as if by machine and a voice said : 'Oo-oo-oo ! How are yer this morning ?' I could have screamed.

'Change the record !' I shouted once, and wished I hadn't.

My turn to be sobbed over came at last, and I slithered down into my bed and pretended to be asleep. I felt Mrs Midgeley pull out my stool and dump herself on it.

'I thought I'd park myself beside you, Kathleen, if you don't mind. I can see the door from here, and my Jack will see me !' She sighed heavily. 'Thank goodness all those goodbyes are over ! I've been dreading it. I'm not really one to get all gooey over a lot of women in the normal way. But we've all been through the same thing, haven't we ? And that makes us nearer to each other. They're a lovely lot of women. I couldn't have wished for better.'

She leaned over me and spoke softly.

'Don't say anything, but my Jack is bringing you a present. Now don't say I shouldn't or anything like that. I wanted to buy you something just to show you that we're both fond of you, and if we can do anything . . . I told Jack to buy a pretty nylon slip and knickers, small woman's, pale yellow . . . I hope that's what you like ?'

I said : 'I don't see why you should. . . .'

'I do . . . You're not like the rest of us. When you walk out of here, your arms will be empty, or if they let you keep it for a while you'll lose it in the end. You'll feel it, though you think you won't . . . So, I thought a present showing someone has thought of you might help . . . I've been so worried about you, Kathleen, not having your baby, never seeing it again once it's adopted, never knowing if it's alive or dead. That seems a dreadful punishment to me. . . .'

She went to the door, looking older in her high-heeled shoes and new ill-fitting dress than she had looked in her dressing-gown and slippers.

Mrs Midgeley came back, looking very unhappy.

'I'm getting really worried now. It's nearly ten o'clock! My Jack is always so punctual! I can't think what can be keeping him! Still, he always has turned up in the past, so I don't see why he shouldn't now, do you?'

'No.'

She sighed several times, then said:

'You do like lemon, don't you?'

'It's all right. . . .'

She sounded worried:

'I want it to be something you really like, Kathleen! I thought of lemon, because well . . . I watched you the other day . . . the day you came in it was . . . and the colour of your hair made me want to cry. It's exactly the colour in a picture my dear old mother had in her kitchen. It was a girl with hair your colour, sitting in a field of buttercups and daisies. . . .'

She saw a shadow at the door, jumped up, tottered on her high heels to the door. But she came back again.

'He's *never* late! You don't think anything could have happened to him, do you? Oh what a fool I am! He's buying the nylon set for you! Why didn't I think of that before? I told him not to come without them!' She picked up my crash helmet. 'What's this? A crash helmet? I hope you don't go pillion riding, Kathleen . . . Death traps those motor-bikes are! I'd never rest if I thought anyone of mine went on one!'

Once more she went to the door, and again came back.

'He can't be long now, can he? . . . Kathleen . . . My Jack told me about yesterday . . . you know, when you got het up at something he said. It properly upset poor Jack. He wouldn't hurt a fly . . . and he thinks the world of you, in a nice way, I mean . . . We both think the world of you, come to that. You looked so pretty and so very young that first night lying there that we both cried over you! Perhaps you don't believe it, but it's true, and we've talked such a lot about you, and we've said if we could help in any way . . . in ANY way . . . we would. I can't say fairer than that, can I?'

I said 'No' though I was very hazy as to her meaning.

'For instance,' she said, 'what are you going to do when you leave hospital? I know the baby's going to be adopted, poor little scrap . . . So that finishes her off. But what about you? Your mother told that Mrs Green that she wouldn't have you back until you were eighteen and had some sense. I quarrelled with Mrs Green over it. I said that whatever a child of fourteen had done or hadn't done, if her mother didn't stand by her, where was she?' Mrs Midgeley seemed to have forgotten her Jack. 'I mean, would you want to live with us for a bit?'

I didn't know what to say.

'Eh?'

'I don't really want to live anywhere,' I said.

She shrugged her shoulders and plonked the crash helmet down on my bed as if she was finished with it.

'That's talking silly, isn't it? You've got to live somewhere, haven't you? What don't you like about your own home?'

I tried to remember :

'There's nothing to do. . . .'

'Haven't you got a telly?'

'Yes.'

'Well, that's something to do, isn't it? I'm sure my Jack and I wouldn't know what to do without our telly. Mind you, we don't look at EVERYTHING . . . Some of it's rubbish, but. . . .'

I realized that somebody had stopped beside my bed. I looked up and recognized the small, high chest and rounded back of Mrs Sleeman-Evans.

'Good morning!' she said in her very quiet voice. Mrs Midgeley got up. 'Oh, please don't disturb yourself! I can come back! My time's my own! I can go and see the baby again! She's getting on splendidly, isn't she?'

'I was just going,' Mrs Midgeley said. 'I'm going home this morning . . . I'm waiting for my husband. . . .'

'Oh, how very nice!'

'He was supposed to be here at nine o'clock. . . .'

'Oh dear . . .'

‘Yes, but I’m not really worrying . . . We know now where he’s gone, don’t we, Kathleen?’ She bent over me and hugged me. I felt myself go stiff. ‘Goodbye . . . And remember you’ve made friends who will always do anything they can . . . Goodbye . . . and always keep as pretty, won’t you?’



MRS SLEEMAN-EVANS was slow in making herself comfortable on my stool and even more slow in beginning to talk. She smiled at me for some seconds, then said :

‘You’re looking very well, and, if I may say so, very pretty. I hope you’re feeling well?’

‘I’m all right.’

‘I bought you some magazines. I hope they’re the ones you like. I’ve never met this one before, but it’s obviously for teenagers, isn’t it?’

She carefully placed the magazines on my locker, looked appreciatively round the ward as if she liked everything she saw, smiled and nodded as she caught people’s eyes.

‘Fancy!’ she said. ‘Your little one is nearly a week old! I’ve had a peep at her, of course. She’s delightful, quite the loveliest baby I have ever had! I mean that . . . The people who are adopting her are going to be exceedingly lucky. Perhaps at this very moment they are painting her room . . . making curtains with rabbits and chickens on . . . feeling a little afraid of what they’re taking on . . . feeling excited . . . As I said, they are very lucky people. When your baby is your age, she will probably be exactly like you! Just imagine that! . . . I

wish you had given her a name . . . Of course, from their point of view, it will be nicer . . . THEY will choose her name. . . .’

She turned over the pages of one of the magazines. The babies were being wheeled in for feeding. The mothers waited eagerly. You could feel their tension when their baby wasn’t on that trolley . . . But when their turn came, they laughed as if they hadn’t been worried, held out their arms, chaffed the nurses and then talked to the babies and to each other. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but I could guess. I had heard most of it before. It was daft talk, and they all did it whatever their age. One woman, I think her name was Davis, pretty-well ate her baby, the way she slobbered over it.

‘They forgot to give her the pepper and salt,’ I said, annoyed.

Mrs Sleeman-Evans looked up from her reading :

‘Oh, can I fetch something for anyone . . .?’

‘Skip it!’ I said.

The woman next to me was a Mrs Spooner. She didn’t get her baby.

‘I wonder why?’ I said.

‘I beg your pardon?’ Mrs Sleeman-Evans said.

‘The woman in the next bed hasn’t got her baby. . . .’

‘Oh, hasn’t she? I expect it will come. . . .’

‘It might not. It might be dead. One baby did die . . . The mother had to have my little room. . . .’

‘Hush . . . she’ll hear you. . . .’

‘. . . or she might be having it adopted. . . .’

‘Oh, no. I’m sure she isn’t!’

‘How can you tell?’

‘I can’t . . . but it’s probably a premature baby and lives in an oxygen tent, or something like that. It must be very sad for her to see all the others . . . I’m hoping they’ll let me take your little one by the week-end,’ she said.

I sat up.

‘Where are you going to take it?’

‘To my home . . . at Chelsea . . . It’s quite charming. It

looks over the river where it widens. Some nights, when the moon is on the water and the buildings opposite are in shadow, I feel I'm by the sea. I don't think I *could* live anywhere else. I call it *my* river! Silly, perhaps, but you are silly when you live alone . . . In the early morning, the river is white! You'd hardly believe it, but it is so. And of course the sunsets . . .!' She looked at the door, smiling. Mrs Midgeley was still there, looking such a fool somehow, now with a stupid hat on her head and a coat on her arm and white gloves dangling. But Mrs Sleeman-Evans wasn't seeing her, I'm sure. She was smiling at the sunset she could see from her window at Chelsea. 'But you must come and see my flat! You'll love my babies' room . . . The first baby I ever had in it was Susan . . . So I called it "Susan's Room" and it has been Susan's Room ever since . . . I was so very very happy with Susan, I thought I would never forget her. . . .' She sighed. 'The sad thing is, I *have* forgotten her . . . There have been so many others. . . .'

'Where do they all go?'

'Oh . . . to be adopted nearly always. Occasionally they go to nurseries . . . But I like having the ones that are going to be adopted.'

'I'm not going to let mine be adopted,' I said.

The smile left her face. She stared at me, and then smiled again.

'You like joking, Kathleen!'

'It isn't a joke. I'm not going to have it adopted. And why should I if I don't want to?'

She stared at me as if she had seen me before and wasn't quite sure where.

'You'll know me next time you see me,' I said.

'I beg your pardon?' she asked, shaking her head.

'Skip it. . . .'

We didn't say anything else for some minutes. I watched a baby sucking at a breast. This one looked not quite so revolting. The mother was young, nearly as young as me. I hadn't heard much of her. She must have come into the ward during my

banishment. No it didn't look half so revolting on her. It almost looked nice.

'I'd be the last one to advise anyone to give a baby up if they could possibly keep it,' Mrs Sleeman-Evans said. 'But your mother said it had all been fixed up. She went herself to the Adoption Society and I believe said you yourself had asked her to go and. . . .'

I felt mad.

'It isn't fixed up! It won't be, either! And even if it was, I can change my mind, can't I? My mother got at me before I had had the baby, when I was frightened . . . Of course you say it can be adopted! You don't want it. You want to be through with the whole thing . . . But it's different now . . . I'm not letting it be adopted!'

Mrs Sleeman-Evans looked as if I had hit her.

'Oh dear! This is dreadful! I don't know what to say . . . I do see your point . . . I do really . . . But I also see the baby's side of it. Babies want a settled home, a mother and a father, and . . . Are you sure you're doing the right thing by your baby? You won't be able to care for it properly, Kathleen! You're not ready for such a great responsibility!'

'How do you know?' I shouted.

'Don't get angry, Kathleen! It will only upset you. You probably need a little more time . . . and then you'll see you must have it adopted. . . .'

'I am not going to have it adopted!' I shouted. 'Not now! Not ever! So you can get back to your Susan's Room and watch your river!'

She looked so hurt, I felt almost sorry for her.

'I'm so very very sorry, Kathleen! Please do understand that I come here on behalf of the Adoption Society. I work for them, as I told you. They booked me up to take the baby while things were being sorted out. You must have a chat with your welfare officer, mustn't you, and she'll fix things to your satisfaction, I'm sure . . . Whatever happens, I'm glad I have got to know

your baby a little . . . Perhaps your mother has now changed her mind? Perhaps she has agreed to have the baby?’

We watched while nurse put a screen round Mrs Spooner.

‘I’m not in the way, am I, Nurse?’ Mrs Sleeman-Evans asked, smiling.

‘No . . . We’ll throw you out when you are!’

Mrs Midgeley was waving from the door.

‘It’s all right. My Jack just telephoned! He’ll be a bit late, that’s all.’

Laughter came from several of the feeding mothers.

‘I bet she’s a blonde!’ one shouted.

‘He had to go back for his tape-measure to make sure of her vital statistics!’

‘No, that’s not it at all! He’s had to air the bed to get the scent out!’

Mrs Sleeman-Evans’s eyes went from one to another of the speakers, but I don’t think she took in what they were saying. Her mind was still on my baby.

‘You won’t mind my asking you, Kathleen, will you . . . But I’m still very interested in your baby . . . What plans have you in mind for it?’

‘Give me a chance! I can’t make plans till I’m out of here, can I?’

‘They won’t keep it in hospital, you know . . . What I’m trying to say is that even if it isn’t being adopted, perhaps I could look after the baby while you’re making plans for it . . . I mean . . . No . . . I ought not to worry you at this moment about the baby . . . Tell me about yourself . . . What sort of thing you do in the evenings, what hobbies you have. . . .’

Mrs Midgeley’s Jack was coming towards me.

‘Excuse me,’ he said, ‘but this is with my wife’s love . . . and with a little of mine, too . . . Sorry I can’t stop, but I’ve got a date with a baby! Be good, won’t you? And if there’s anything we can do, you’ve only got to say . . . And I’m sorry about the other night. . . .’

Mrs. Midgeley had the baby in her arms.

'Jack!' she called. 'Don't forget to say goodbye to Mrs Prince. She's got a crush on you!' She came towards me. 'I know you won't want to see my baby, Kathy . . . Not yet, eh? But you will . . . Anyway, you've got my address inside the parcel . . . I'll write, and you must write.'

She hovered so long, I nearly shouted :

'Go away!'

But a nurse saved me by calling out :

'Visitors! Please leave the ward!'

Mrs Midgeley shouted : 'Jack! Jack!'

Mrs Sleeman-Evans said :

'Goodbye, Kathleen . . . Everything will be all right, I am sure . . . And I'll come and see you again, shall I?' She backed to the door, smiling all the time. She backed into my doctor who was coming my way with Sister. I forgot everybody else on the instant. I made my eyes sparkle. I tossed my hair so that the shine would dazzle him.

But he passed by without a glance in my direction. He went behind the screen round Mrs Spooner's bed, and it felt suddenly as if the whole ward had been struck into statues. There was something wrong. I felt frightened.

Mrs Rawlings crept past my bed. She pointed to the screen and mouthed two words :

'Poor thing!'

THE Almoner came to see me while I was picking at my dinner. I wasn't hungry, and I don't like mince or greens or slushy potatoes.

The Almoner was young, very smart in a white coat, but with the manner of ten old-maid school marms put together. She was used to getting her own way, you could tell. She was so used to saying 'Do this!' and getting it done that she'd have fallen through the floor if anyone had said 'Shan't!'

'Now, Kathleen . . . I've been meaning to come to see you for the past few days; but when I did come to the ward you weren't here, and . . . So it's unfortunate that I have to come and see you now on what I suppose you will think are two big grouses. One of them is about a complaint made by Mrs Connolly—which of course we must investigate; and the other, and more important, is this question of your baby . . . Your mother gave me to understand that you had decided to have the baby adopted as soon as possible and that she had arranged for a foster mother to take your baby straight from hospital. That sounds hard, but sometimes it is best all round. The baby gets a chance of a settled life and individual care right from the start. And you get a chance of being your age, being fifteen,

being able to gad about, make friends, have boy friends, lots of them until you are old enough to settle on one and marry him . . . It wouldn't be so easy to get married, you know, with a baby round your neck . . . And being a step-father or step-mother isn't an easy position at the best of times . . . So when your mother advises you to get your baby adopted from the start, these are some of the things she had in mind. . . .'

She smiled at me as if everything had been talked out and agreed and there was nothing more to do.

'Shall we now pass on to this unfortunate matter of Mrs Connolly? Or is there anything you'd like to say about the baby?'

'Yes . . . I'm not going to have the baby adopted.'

She shook her head.

'Oh dear, Kathleen . . . This just won't do, you know. You can't play ducks and drakes with a baby! You can't say one minute you'll have it adopted and let all sorts of things be put in train, and then the next alter your mind! All the reasons you had for agreeing to have it adopted still hold good, don't they, now?'

'I didn't have any reasons. I just felt so awful . . . so frightened . . . so ill that I didn't care. If Mum had said shall I cut its head off I'd have said yes. If they had said we'll drown it, like you do a kitten you don't want, I'd have said yes . . . or turned my head away . . .!'

She let me half sob for a minute, then she said:

'All right. You didn't know what you were doing. But your mother always did know what she was doing, didn't she? And she has begged for it to be adopted!'

'What has it got to do with her? Even if I get rid of the baby, she won't have me home. She says if I do this, that and the other she MAY have me back, but she won't. She doesn't want me. She only wants her dear Tina who is never going to do anything her Mum doesn't say she can. . . .'

We glared at each other, and it was my eyes that dropped



first. I reckon that Almoner would have stared a tiger out or a gun at point blank range.

'You be me,' I said. 'How would you like it if they came and took your baby away and said you were never never never going to know where it had gone?'

The queer thing was that when I had been telling Mrs Sleeman-Evans that I wouldn't have the baby adopted, I hadn't really felt a thing. I hadn't cared a scrap about the baby. All I had known was that Johnny wanted it and that I had as good as said: 'O.K. Done! Changey-changey for a leather coat.' And yet now, I did care, I didn't want the baby to go for ever. I wouldn't even let Johnny have it for ever, not even for the best leather coat in the world.

'It's all very sad, Kathleen,' the Almoner said. 'I've seen this happen time and time again, when a girl has seen how important it is for the baby that it is adopted, but then has natural feelings for it . . . But if you love your baby, you'll do what's best for it. Believe me that is real mother love. What sort of life will your baby have if it isn't adopted? Your mother won't have it at home. . . .'

The Almoner took my lunch tray from me and put it on the trolley.

'You didn't eat much!'

'I don't like mince. . . .'

'I don't either. But I eat it. I make a point of eating whatever is put in front of me. . . .' She took out a sheet of paper. 'Now, Kathleen, let's just get things straight. We'll suppose you don't have the baby adopted. You can't have it because you've got no home, no job, nothing for its care. So what happens to it? It goes into a nursery. . . .'

'Well, what's the matter with that? I could go and see it sometimes, couldn't I?'

'Babies aren't happy in nurseries, you know. They want the attention of one person who loves them. Babies in nurseries have to share the attention of lots of people, and it is bewildering for them and very unsatisfying. One nurse puts them to bed, but

if they cry in the night it's another nurse—and very often a complete stranger—who comes to them. . . .'

'Well . . . So long as someone goes to it, what does it matter?'

The Almoner shrugged her shoulders, opened her hands, breathed in deeply as if she didn't know what to do next.

'Look, Kathleen . . . Let's forget the baby for the moment since we don't speak the same language about it . . . and maybe it's too soon for you to decide. Let's think of you. You're a bright girl. You won a place in a grammar school. In spite of your home difficulties about homework, you were well placed in your form—wasn't it first? Now, you ought to go on with your education. With your abilities, you could train for something worth while—say as a teacher, or as a nurse. You could go to college, and college by and large is great fun. I know. I went to college. I had a whale of a time. I wasn't what you'd call "good"; but being at college and having to live up to certain standards and accept certain restrictions, I was able to keep my urges in check. You think you're the only one who has urges, I expect? We all have them. We all want to kick over the traces, to stay out when we can only keep control of the situation by going in. You know, this experience you have had needn't spoil your life at all. If you really wanted to, you could go to a new school and get your G.C.E. and so forth and go on from there.'

She stared at me, expecting an answer, but there was nothing I could say. I hadn't listened all that well. I had been studying her, realizing how very lovely she was. She had golden hair smarmed straight back. If she hadn't been so good looking, it would have been awful. She had a good figure, too, a sweater-girl figure. I thought, if you made yourself a bit modern, and wore shortie jackets, and stiletto heels and a tight skirt, you'd get mobbed like a film star.

She smiled at me as if she had got her own way.

'Well, Kathleen . . . You'll have another think, will you? Your baby deserves a nice home, and I think you deserve a

break. If we all worked together, we could help you to make something of your life. Don't waste that brain of yours, and don't let this baby spoil your life. It's all over and done with if you'll let it be. And you'll be wiser next time, I hope. Anyway, you'll be a little older, and that helps. . . .'

She left me, quite satisfied with her talk. I watched her go down the ward. I was thinking: 'Why my doctor doesn't carry you off to his lair and marry you, I don't know . . . ' when she suddenly turned round and hurried back.

'Kathleen! I was forgetting . . . 'There's this other bit of unpleasantness, isn't there? We'd better get the thing straightened out, hadn't we. You know of course that Mrs Connolly has made a complaint about your attack on her and about a young man who visits you. . . .'

I lay down in my bed, closed my eyes.

'Sit up, at once, Kathleen! You can't behave like that!' She made me sit up. 'Now, you're going to listen . . . I'm not going to tell you off about what happened. That's Sister's pigeon. She keeps the peace in her ward. But Mrs Connolly is going to take you to court unless we can persuade her to drop it. I think I could persuade her to drop the matter if you stopped this person the trouble was about from coming here. . . .'

'Why should I? She has visitors, doesn't she?'

'Mrs Connolly says this boy is the one responsible for the baby!'

'Clever isn't she? I suppose she saw us doing it, did she? If she didn't, how can she know? I've got tons of boy friends. If I like, I can say it was all of them, and I will if she takes me to court. I'd like to bash her!'

I glared at the end of the ward where Mrs Connolly was. It really hurt me, having to lie there and not run at her. I felt as if something inside me would break.

The Almoner said:

'Oh, dear, Kathleen, what are we going to do with you, eh? You mustn't think you can bash your way to happiness or even peace! You've got to come to terms with yourself and circum-

tances . . . Now look . . . You'll be going home in a few days . . . Would it hurt you if you didn't see this boy, quite apart from your relationship with him, and overlooking, too, his own danger. . . .'

'Would you like to lie in a hospital bed and not have visitors?'

'But you have other visitors, don't you?'

'The only other visitors I have are the nosey bitches who come to find out things. . . .'

'I could stop this young man myself, Kathleen, but I hesitate to condemn him out of hand. Is he the baby's father?'

I banged my fists on the bed.

'There we go again : how, when, where, why, which, what, who . . . ! The baby's got thousands of fathers ! It was dozens of different boys, and not one of them was the one that nosey old bitch has picked on ! And you can tell her from me that if she gets him to court, I'll slit her face to ribbons, and she'll be so busy trying not to remember it that she'll leave everybody else alone !'

We said nothing more for a long time. The Almoner suddenly looked at her watch :

'Oh dear, Kathleen ! I'm late for an appointment. I'm sorry I've made such a hash of our interview. Don't think any more about it ! I'll come again, and we'll sort something out, shall we?'

I didn't answer. I was still too mad. She hurried out of the ward.

I FOUND I missed Mrs Midgeley. She was the one who went from bed to bed, chatting, fetching and carrying, including each patient in whatever was going on, making you a part of the ward. She helped the nurses change beds, arrange the flowers, hand round the food. She seemed to know when you were down in the dumps, or when you wanted an argument, or when you just needed to hear a voice no matter what it said.

To fill in the gap caused by realizing she wouldn't be there any more, I opened the parcel her Jack had brought me.

It was like opening a parcel in one of those tantalizing Christmas games. First, there was the bag with 'Dolores' written across it; then a sheet of brown paper kept fast with adhesive tape that I had to fight to get off; then three separate sheets of tissue paper, snowy white, exciting . . . I could see the lemon colour through the tissue paper—a lovely spring-like colour.

I was in a hurry then. I dragged the slip from its tissue, held it up, and immediately began to cry. It was what I would have chosen if I had had every slip in the world to choose from. It was my size. It had tiers of lace at the edge, but the rest of it was closely tailored. There were white daisies on the bra top. It was a dream slip. And the panties were dream panties.

I lay back exhausted with happiness, holding the garments against my face.

'Oh . . . aren't they pretty!' Mrs Taylor said as she was passing. 'Hold them up! Let's all get a cheap thrill!'

'Proper honeymoon doodahs, they are!' Mrs Davis shouted. 'You want to watch your step, Honey, when you put those on. Present from your boy friend?'

Mrs Rawlings came over from the far side and held my slip up against herself.

'Mrs Midgeley told me she was going to get her Jack to buy these for you,' she said. 'It's like her. Always thinking of somebody else. All I can say is her old man must have had plenty of practice in buying underclothes for blondes! If I had asked my old man to buy a set of underclothes, I'd have been lucky to get a pair of navy blue passion cheaters! Nice woman that Mrs Midgeley . . . one of the best, and we shall all miss her. There was only one fault I could find with her and that was the way she told her Jack she'd go through it all over again and think nothing of it! That's what I call letting the side down. I mean, dammit, have a short period when you say "never again"!'

Mrs Rawlings pulled out Mrs Spooner's stool and sat heavily.

'I could have cried when I heard about your baby, Mrs Spooner!' she said. 'In fact I did cry. I wanted to come right over, but . . .' Mrs Spooner's face tightened. 'Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned it, but they do say that people should talk when they've lost somebody, don't they?'

Mrs Spooner swallowed, blew her nose, looked as if she was being forced to say 'cheese' at a camera.

'Yes . . . Thank you for . . . for mentioning it.'

'Seems such a waste of all those months . . . and you had a terrible time, didn't you? Makes you wonder what life is all about, doesn't it? What I was saying to Mrs Davis was what a pity it is they couldn't have done a swop of your baby with young Kathleen's! I mean, why not? I reckon if I'd been a nurse and I realized your baby was on its last legs, I'd have been sorely tempted to swop the identity discs. And nobody would

have been any the wiser! And you'd still have had a baby, and young Kathleen wouldn't have been worried out of her life about what to do with her baby . . . !'

I shouted : 'Don't mind me, will you?'

'I don't mean anything nasty, Kathleen, or anything against you; but can't you see that if some nurse had switched those babies immediately it was realized one was going to die, you could have written "The End" to your chapter, and all poor Mrs Spooner went through wouldn't have been thrown away. . . .'

'What has happened to Mrs Spooner's baby then?' I asked.

'I don't think they are all that sure what it died of, are they, Mrs Spooner? She hasn't been well for a couple of days, has she? Of course, nobody can say, but that Mrs Drury who was a nurse before she was married says it must be an infection. And that's catching, isn't it? I mean, it makes you wonder about your own baby, doesn't it?'

I could see poor Mrs Spooner wanted her to shut up, but she went on and on and on. I lay back trying not to listen to her. The yellow slip lay across my bed. It no longer made me feel happy, although it was the first nylon set I had ever possessed, and I had so longed for one that I had contemplated stealing a slip from one of the girls at Prenderfold House. Mae Parry used to scream with laughter at my schoolgirl briefs and vests.

'And you got yourself a baby wearing those!' she would scream. 'What's the world coming to? Or perhaps he was a blind man, poor thing!'

I felt depressed, restless, uncertain, worried. I decided I would have to get up, although the lady doctor had said I was to stay in bed until Friday. I felt that if I left my getting up to the doctors, I'd never get up . . . And then I worried because I knew that when I got up I'd have no place to go to. Just suppose I ran away, where could I go? My old school friends wouldn't want me any more. Their mothers had forbidden them to have anything to do with me, in case they got into trouble, as if having a baby was catching!

Mrs Rawlings's voice was still going on and on and on. Poor Mrs Spooner had to listen, saying nothing. I lay hearing what was being said without taking it in, until a sentence seemed to hammer at my brain :

'She came to fetch it away this morning !'

I shot up.

'What did you say?' I demanded.

Mrs Rawlings looked round :

'I was only telling Mrs Spooner that she came to get it this morning. . . .'

I jumped out of bed and stuck my face right under hers :

'WHAT did you say? Go on ! Say it again ! I dare you to !'

She leaned back, frightened of me. She stared, smiled, stuttered :

'She did, Ducky !'

'You're a liar !' I said.

'I'm sorry . . . but that's what I thought when I saw her. We all thought so . . . We were wrong, obviously . . . Don't get annoyed, Kathleen, please ! And you're upsetting poor Mrs Spooner, and she's had enough for one day, you know very well she has . . . !'

I still kept my face close to hers.

'Well, don't you get telling any more lies ! She didn't come to fetch my baby today, and she's not coming to fetch it any day, neither !'

'My mistake ! I'm sorry ! Anyone can make a mistake, Kathleen, can't they ? I saw that little woman here that everyone says is going to have your baby till it's adopted, and then I noticed your baby wasn't in its crib . . . So naturally I. . . .'

My eyes were so close to hers now that I couldn't focus.

'My baby is still in its crib ! D'you hear ! You didn't notice it wasn't in its crib ! You're a liar ! A bloody liar ! If it isn't in its crib, they've switched it ! That's what they've done, like you said they ought ! They're not going to palm a dead baby off on me ! Because I'm young, you think you can put on me, but. . . .'



I raced for the doors, tore across the hall, past my little room, past the kitchen to the great glass screen which I had always known was there but had pretended it wasn't. I got an impression of babies in little square trays of beds on iron stands, and of two nurses I didn't know wearing masks. There was a door at the side marked 'No Admittance'.

I opened the door. One of the nurses looked up, waved me away.

'I want my baby!' I shouted.

She came towards me, pulled her mask down and said :

'You can't come in here!'

'Where's my baby?' I shouted.

'Your baby?' She stared at me. 'Oh, you're little Purslowe, aren't you?' She tried to edge me to the door, but I stood firm. 'You can't stay in here, you know. Not allowed. Let's find Sister.'

'You're not getting me out of here till you put my baby back!' I screamed. 'I know your game! You're trying to swop it for a dead one, aren't you?'

Both nurses came towards me. I knew they were going to put me out. I didn't want to be put out. I wanted my baby. I wanted to see it, to wonder about it, too. . . .

'Don't turn me out!' I shouted. 'I won't shout! I won't do anything. I just want to *see* the baby, to know it's still here . . . You haven't swopped it, have you? Show me it! Just show it, and then I'll go away, and. . . .'

Sister came then, and Nurse Brown, and through the screen I could see Mrs Connolly, pretending she was going to the bath-room when all she wanted was to nose into my affairs. Having them all round me like that made me want to fight, to show them that they couldn't play with me. Luckily it was Nurse Brown who took my arm. If it had been one of the others who so much as touched me, I wouldn't have been able to help myself, I'd have hit out, smashed something. . . .'

'Come on, Sweetheart,' Nurse Brown said. 'Of course you can see your baby. . . .'

'I want to see it now. . . .'

'So you shall. Come on . . .!'

'You're just playing a trick on me! You're getting me out of this place and. . . .'

'Kathleen! Stop it! I'm taking you right now to see your baby! She's in that isolation room there . . . See . . . The room marked "3 G". . . .'

'Why isn't my baby with the others? Why isn't she in here? Why is she in isolation?'

'Isolation is just a precaution, Kathleen. . . .'

'My baby's ill?'

'No . . . no . . . no . . . A bit off song . . . One baby was ill, very ill. . . .'

'It died! And you think my baby's going to die, don't you?'

Nurse Brown shook me.

'Kathleen! I won't listen to any more of your nonsense! Your baby is *not* ill. Your baby is not going to die . . . Your baby is simply getting extra care because we don't want it to get any germs . . . You had better put a mask on . . . Here's one . . . Now. . . .'

We went into the room. It was just like my little room except that it had two of those swung cots in it and glass-topped trolleys covered with white cloths. I stayed just inside the door. Nurse Brown went straight to the baby by the window. I didn't move. I tried not to look, but I had to. I saw a tiny pink face surrounded by dark hair and a tiny groping hand.

'Come on!' Nurse Brown said, pulling at her mask. 'Meet Baby Purslowe . . . Vital statistics perfect!'

I stood there, watching the baby from a distance, a safe distance. I wasn't exactly frightened, though that was in it. I was disappointed—not with the baby. It looked cute. I was disappointed with myself, because I didn't feel any different. I didn't feel all gooey like all the other mothers did. I didn't even feel like I had felt when I first saw the puppy the old shoe repairer was going to give me.

ALL the mothers were making themselves up ready for visiting time. The nurses chaffed them about it, and they chaffed each other. Even the funny little wizened woman I called 'Oo-oo-oo' was putting powder and lipstick on !

On our side and at our end of the ward, there were three beds—mine first, then Mrs Spooner's and then an empty one. There was no making up at our end. I couldn't be bothered as I wouldn't have a visitor, and Mrs Spooner looked as if she couldn't care less about anything. I felt sorry for her. I didn't like my baby much, but I wouldn't have wanted to know it was dead. I thought I ought to try to talk to her.

'I saw my baby today,' I called.

She did that 'cheese' smile, and then went on staring at the flowers on the centre table. I couldn't help thinking of what Mrs Prince had said about that table. 'Looks like the top of a coffin'. Mrs Spooner must remember that. They would put her baby in a coffin, and shut the lid on it, and put flowers on the top and then put it into the earth. . . .

I got frightened then. My baby was in isolation. They must think something was wrong with it. They wouldn't put it into isolation for nothing. I said to Mrs Spooner :

'They're keeping my baby in isolation. . . .'

She said nothing but nodded.

'Was your baby in isolation?'

'No.'

I wanted to ask her all about it—when they knew it was dead, what made them think of looking at it, why it had died, why they hadn't been able to do anything, if she minded terribly, would she have any more children . . . But it wasn't easy to talk to someone who stared at those flowers like she was looking into a grave. And when I did at last get to the point of asking her, Sister came along with a screen.

'I thought you'd like to see your husband and sister in private, Mrs Spooner . . . I'll Eeing them in right away.'

I had to sit there for ten minutes or a quarter of an hour, listening to the sobbing that came from behind the screen. It got on my nerves. I wanted to shout: 'Put a sock in it!' It got so that I was looking at the table full of flowers, seeing it as the lid of a coffin, only the baby underneath was the little black-haired one with the clenching fist that Nurse Brown had said was mine. I didn't want it to die. I wanted it to live. It would grow up and go to school and start cheeking me, and I would do all the old-fashioned mother stuff at it, and by then I would think jiving was wicked, and I wouldn't let on to anyone that I had once teased the life out of Johnny and pulled him on to me in the long grass. One thing I wouldn't tell my daughter, though. I wouldn't tell her I wished I hadn't had her, like Mum so often told me. I wouldn't let her think having babies spoiled everything, and if she happened to have a baby herself when she was still at school, I wouldn't turn her out of home as Mum had done.

Mrs Spooner's visitors had been allowed in early. The swing doors to the ward were always kept shut at visiting times until Sister gave the O.K., and then there was a rush. Even though I didn't expect visitors, I always found those last few moments before the doors were opened unbearable. You felt they would

never end. You felt Sister had forgotten and would only remember when visiting time was over. . . .

Johnny was the first visitor to burst through the doors when Sister gave the O.K. He didn't smile. He looked mad.

'You let them take the baby, and you promised you wouldn't! And like a mug I've been and got that leather jacket for you. . . .'

I could see he wasn't carrying a parcel, so I said: 'I've got the baby in my arms, like you've got the jacket.'

Johnny could be very dim. 'I don't follow. . . .'

'You said you've got that white jacket, and I can see you haven't. I said I've got the baby in my arms, and you can see I haven't; so we're both lying.'

'Where is the baby? I have got the coat—I mean I've got the money to pay for it! I've got £15! Look!'

He showed me a bundle of notes.

'Where did you get them?'

'Where's the baby?' He threw the notes down. 'There . . . They're yours. Buy yourself the coat. Now where's the baby?'

I took the notes and offered them back to him.

'I don't want your money!' I said. 'You might have stolen it!'

'I did. . . .'

'You didn't, Johnny!'

'I did . . . And I hate myself and everything else for doing it . . . That's why the baby's not there! To pay me out! But you kept on about the coat . . . you kept on . . . and you as good as said I couldn't have the baby if you didn't have the coat. And now you've double-crossed me! The baby's not there! There's all the other babies, but not ours!'

I had to laugh at him. He looked such a fool, standing there, moving his hands about as if he was talking deaf and dumb.

'Keep your hair on, Johnny!' I said. 'I haven't double-crossed you. The baby is in another room, an isolation room . . . I saw it today.'

He seemed excited.

'Did you? Honest? I wanted you to see it! I bet you felt like I did . . . as if you were one person the minute before you saw her, and someone quite different just after.'

'You're nuts, Johnny,' I said. 'I didn't feel anything. It's a cute baby, but. . . .' I gave him the notes. 'You'd better put them back from where you got them.'

'But don't you want the coat?'

'Of course I do . . . But you can't pinch fifteen pounds without being found out! Especially you! You're not good at crime, Johnny. The very first copper that touched you on the shoulder, you'd blab . . . ! No . . . I don't want a coat with that money. Where did you pinch it from?'

'From the works . . . They run a cigarette club, you see, and. . . .'

I said: 'You'd better go right now and put that money back, Johnny! Honest, you're nuts! I mean, you keep coming here when they say if you do you'll land in prison, and now you've pinched money. . . .'

'You kept on about the coat . . . ! It got me down, and I saw this money, and I thought they wouldn't be counting it till near Christmas, and. . . .'

'Put it back, Johnny. . . .'

He took it from me.

'I'd like to . . . I've been feeling terrible ever since I had it. I've never pinched anything like that before . . . I didn't want to nick it . . . I asked my dad to lend me some money, and he said I hadn't a hope until all my debts were paid. I was up all night, worrying . . . because I wanted to make you like me enough to keep the baby for me . . . You did say I'd got to get the coat if I wanted the baby, didn't you?'

'Yes.'

'And don't you mean that now?'

'I don't suppose I do.'

'You mean, you won't let them take the baby, even if I don't get the coat right away?'

I said:

'Johnny . . . A baby died today. That's why ours is in the isolation room!'

Johnny nearly hit the ceiling.

'You mean . . . ? You mean, they're frightened ours might catch it, and . . . ?'

'Could be. . . .'

He stared at me. He looked right through me.

'See . . . ? That's because I pinched that money!' he moaned. 'I knew I'd get paid back in some way. I felt it . . . I felt funny all the time the money was in my pocket, as if I'd pay for every farthing of it! I was thinking of getting caught and going to prison . . . But of course it will be the baby because that's what I'd mind more than anything else!'

I said: 'Stop moaning, and go and put the money back!'

'I can't till tomorrow. It's all shut up. . . .'

I said:

'Forget it, and stop moaning! I mean, you're boring, Johnny! You stole the money . . . O.K. You're going to put it back . . . O.K. Finished! Now we can talk of something else!'

But we didn't talk of anything else. Johnny sat there, staring down, looking as if it was up to him to dig the baby's grave and he didn't want to. There were lots of things I wanted to ask him about—about the Caff, about any new records, about Larry and Merle and Susan. I wanted to tell him I was worried about what was going to happen to me when I left hospital. I wanted to ask him what he would do if he was me. I wanted to ask him to tell me if Larry Pearce had moved because Larry had told me one night when I was afraid to go home that I could go to his place and his mother would look after me and if I was a friend of his she wouldn't ask questions.

But I lay there, saying nothing, hearing the buzz of conversation from the beds near by, watching Nurse Peters arrange flowers on the coffin top while one of the husbands fancied he was no end of a dog and tried to flirt with her.

Suddenly, Johnny jumped up.

'I've gotta go! I know what I've got to do! I've got to get this money back tonight if I have to break in to do it. You see, all the time I've got it, it's pinched and our baby can die! What would I feel like in the morning if I kept the money all night and. . . .'

I said :

'Go and get your brains tested, Johnny! I reckon your mother dropped you on your head when you were a baby!' I stared at him, mocking him, sort of daring him to leave me. And suddenly I felt warm about him, as if I'd like to play him up again, make him kiss me, make him chase me. I had forgotten how good-looking Johnny was.

I made him sit down. I said :

'Johnny! Don't go yet . . . Stay with me . . . D'you remember what you told me the first night you came to see me here? You know . . . all about looking for me for months, and even going out to that mental place at Epsom . . . Say it all again, Johnny . . . I didn't listen that night. I felt too tired. But I want to hear it now. And you said you wanted to go steady with me, didn't you, Johnny? Do you remember?'

In the silence that followed, I saw the two of us on a bench in the park. Johnny had his arm round me, and I wasn't being funny for once. I was warm and safe and happy. . . .

Johnny jumped up again, as if I had held a red hot poker to him :

'I must go . . . ! I've got to get the money back! And . . . Kathy . . . just suppose anything happens to me . . . I mean, if they catch me after I've put the money back and they accuse me of anything and I can't get here, you won't let them take the baby will you? Swear. . . .'

'It might be dead. . . .'

'It won't. I know it won't, not if I get the money back. That's why I've got to hurry . . . And if I'm not caught, I'll come tomorrow and. . . .'

He was halfway down the ward.

'Johnny!' I shouted. 'Johnny!'



He didn't turn round but went blindly through the door nearly knocking into Mrs Rawlings who had gone to see why her husband hadn't come. When she came to my bed, I was crying, I didn't know why.

'Did you see that?' she asked. 'Nearly knocked me flat, that young man of yours did!' She must have noticed my tears. 'Funny you should be crying, Kid . . . I'm dying to have a good old sob myself . . . I suppose it's because my old man hasn't turned up, and I never feel all that sure of him . . . Shall we have a sob-session together?'

THE lights in the ward had been lowered for some time. Headphones had been hung up, and there were no more of those whispered chats that people seemed to go in for just as soon as the lights went down. I sat up and looked round the ward. In every bed, except the one on the other side of Mrs Spooner, there was a long, humpy roll of a person. There was a new woman in Mrs Midgley's bed. She had had twins, and the nurses seemed to think that was very clever indeed. I wondered about those twins, whether she would feed them both at the same time.

At this point, I remembered Mrs Spooner's baby. It must be lying somewhere in the hospital in its coffin . . . Poor little thing. I began to feel as bad about the dead baby as I had felt about the kitten that Mum had drowned. Things ought not to be born if they were only going to die or be bumped off. I could see Mrs Spooner's face. She was asleep with her mouth open. The shadow on her face made her nose look as if someone had pushed it in. She looked ugly. I didn't like her then. She was asleep while her baby lay dead in a coffin. If my baby was dead in a coffin, I wouldn't sleep. . . .

I humped up my pillow, turned over and tried to sleep. I

remembered Johnny, that he was going to put the £15 back that night even if he had to break in . . . I saw him breaking into the sawmills. He was almost over the wall when a policeman shone his torch and. . . .

I screamed.

Nurse came over.

'Dreaming?' she asked, putting my bedclothes straight.

'No. I wasn't asleep. I can't sleep.'

'Where's the pain?'

'I haven't got a pain. I'm just worried.'

'What about?'

'Everything.'

'I'll pray for you,' she said.

She fetched me a drink and held it to my lips, coddling me as if I were ill.

'That'll make you sleep. All you have to do is to close your eyes and wait, and when you open your eyes, it will be morning.'

I wanted to keep her talking. I was afraid of being alone.

'When you pray, do you just say "Our Father which art in heaven . . ."?'

She laughed.

'I don't suppose I've said that prayer on my own all my life. . . .'

'What do you say then?'

'Oh . . . something like "God help her!"'

'Is that enough?'

'I hope so. I've said it often enough . . . I don't tell most people about my prayers, but I feel upset because someone is ill, or unhappy, or has died, or is just like you . . . worried, well, then I say a prayer.'

'Were you upset when Mrs Spooner's baby died?'

She pursed her lips :

'I suppose I was. I never like it when the babies die.'

'Do they often die?'

'Not exactly often, but often enough . . . And now you must go to sleep . . . I've got a temperature to take.'

'Whose? Why?'

'No more questions . . . It's nearly nine o'clock! Good-night!'

I watched her go past the coffin top right down the ward to the bed I used to occupy. And then I lost sight of her. I closed my eyes as she had said, and I didn't go to sleep. I heard her voice: 'God help her. . . .' 'I never like it when the babies die. . . .' ' . . . Not exactly often, but often enough!'

I shouted 'No!' I thought she would come again so that I could ask her if my baby would die. It might . . . It might be dead at this minute, and they wouldn't tell me until tomorrow . . .! I wouldn't know it was dead . . . It would be lying there all night, and the first I would know of it was when they came along with a screen and put it round me, and. . . .

I got up. I put my dressing gown and slippers on. I crept to the door, watching for nurse all the time. She was behind a screen round my old bed.

I was going to the isolation room just to peep and see if my baby was still alive. But when I got to the door, I couldn't go in. I didn't want to know if it was dead. It was alive until I knew it was dead.

I saw the hall clock. It said ten minutes past nine. I watched the clock until the big hand jerked on one minute. It seemed a very long time. Counting like that, the night would go on for ever, and only I would be awake.

I heard voices coming from the kitchen, and panicked. I was near to the top of the stairs, and without meaning to I darted down and hid in the cloakroom where the great fat cleaner had told me to find a green overall. The room was in darkness and that seemed to set my heart beating very fast. I stood with my back to the door, listening, as afraid as if I had escaped from jail.

But I heard nothing except the thuds of my heart. Very carefully, I switched the light on, and frenziedly searched the

pegs where overalls and coats were hanging. Up to that moment, I had had no idea what I was about. But suddenly I knew.

I wasn't going to stay in hospital waiting for them to come and tell me my baby was dead. When it was dead, they wouldn't be able to find me, so I wouldn't know. And all the time I didn't know, it would still be alive. It was alive now. I knew it was alive, because in my mind's eye I could see its dark head and tiny clenched hand.

I found a skirt that wasn't too bad if I rolled it round my waist, and there was a pretty blue plastic raincoat that fitted me beautifully except that it was transparent and showed my pyjama top. I didn't want to wear a green overall. They were so ugly in shape and so heavy in colour. But if I didn't wear something, some nosey parker might notice I was undressed and go and tell the police. An old pair of flatties made me feel fully dressed, except that my pyjamas legs had a tendency to slip down my calf.

I was ready. I turned out the light and waited with the door ajar. I heard footsteps. They were coming for me! Nurse had missed me, and now they were creeping down the stairs, knowing just where I was, their fingers to their lips, tip-toe, tip-toe!

I had to put my hand over my mouth to stop myself from screaming. Standing with my back to the door, my fingers clawed over my lips, my eyes sought a way of escape. There was only the window!

In seconds, I was out on the sill. A few feet below was a wired glass slanting roof. Hanging with my hands on the sill, I could just make it. I took off the flatties because they were so loose I was afraid I would lose them. One went into one pocket, and the other in the other. With my bare feet in the guttering and my body against the wall, I waited in case I had been seen. Luckily the section of the hospital below me was in darkness, though, less luckily a full moon picked me out as if it were a spotlight and I a performer on the stage. I had to be quick.

Anyone walking across the grounds or looking out of a window in the block opposite must see me.

There was a drain pipe I could use. But touching its encrusted surface reminded me of an occasion when we had been playing 'Cops and Robbers' and I had escaped down a drain-pipe, tearing the skin off my hands so badly that I was rushed to hospital. It looked a long drop from where I was standing, but when I was hanging clear of the building, my feet pawing the air, I realized I had jumped from many a higher branch of a tree. I breathed deeply, said : 'One, two, three,' then let myself go, landing easily on cool grass and rolling into a bed of geraniums. It seemed to me that I made a noise like an avalanche, the whistle of gaining speed being provided by my plastic raincoat. So I lay still for what seemed minutes in case anyone idly wondered what the noise was and looked out.

I hadn't realized the hospital grounds were so extensive. Paths everywhere skirted grass areas, and every path, however innocent it looked at first taking, led to a building with lights blazing. But at last I followed a path that led only to a shed against a wall. I didn't have to think. I was on that shed, over the wall, and in the street in seconds.

AS I walked along the unfamiliar street, I felt excited to the point of bursting, and so happy I would have danced and sung if my legs hadn't felt so wobbly. People passed, each one terrifying me momentarily until I realized I just wasn't there for them. I felt as if I had escaped from a long term of imprisonment.

I realized soon after I left the hospital that I was terribly tired. I wanted to lie down somewhere and die staring up at the moon. I thought, it's better to die out in the open than in hospital . . . The dark-haired baby with the clawing hands might be dying in hospital at that moment. We ought to have been together, to die together, each feeling warmed by the other until . . . I began to run away from my thoughts, crying. . . .

I reached the High Road. On the corner was a pub, ablaze with lights. A man staggered out. I thought, Dad will be at *his* pub. If I hurry, I can get there before it closes, and even if I'm not there until after ten, Dad will be outside. Dad always stood outside the pub after closing time, in wind and hail and rain. I knew why he did that. He was hoping that if he stayed out late enough Mum would be in bed and asleep when he got back.

Once I had remembered Dad, I knew I had got to reach him. But I was tired to tears. If I had had any money, I could have got a bus.

The man who had staggered out of the pub was being sick in the gutter. Seeing him sick made me heave. I leaned against the wall, trying not to hear the slop of his vomit.

Another man came from the pub. He said :

'Are you all right, Charlie?' he saw me. 'Hullo! Hullo! Hullo!' he said. 'Have you had too much as well?'

He came right near me. His breath smelt foul. I said :

'Give me a shilling. . . .'

He laughed.

'Reminds me of a dirty poem . . . "I gave her a shilling and she was willing. . . ."' Are you willing if I give you a shilling?'

I was sick then. I wanted to die. I didn't care about the shilling any more. I just cried. The man took his handkerchief from his pocket, wiped my mouth and raincoat, kept saying : 'There! There! That's better, isn't it? You poor kid! I didn't think you were ill, or I wouldn't have made such a lousy joke . . . I know what you want—a nice drop of brandy! What d'you say to that?'

I kept sobbing : 'I want my dad!'

'You shall have your dad. But let me buy you a brandy first, eh?'

I said : 'I wanted the money for my fare, that's all . . . I wanted to get to my dad, and I felt ill, and. . . .'

'Where is your dad?'

'He goes to a pub called "The Grapes". I don't quite know how you get to it from here, but. . . .'

'"The Grapes",' he said. 'Charlie! D'you happen to know a pub called "The Grapes"?'

Charlie was standing looking down into the gutter. He wasn't being sick any more. He was just standing there looking down on the mess he had made.



'Down by the bus garage,' he said as if he still had sick in his mouth. 'Opposite.'

The man by me said :

'Will you be all right till I come back, Charlie? I've got a young blonde here who's green about the gills . . . The decent thing will be to take her home to her father . . . I know nobody will believe that's all I'm going to do, but it's true. Poor kid really is ill . . . O.K.?'

He took my arm and led me to a car parked on the other side of the road.

'Jump in, Kid . . . You don't feel sick any more, do you? Tell you what, turn the window right down and if you do feel sick hang over like you were feeding the fishes . . . and I'll be hoping the wind's in a favourable direction!'

It didn't feel like me, slumped in the comfort of that car. I was shivering. My teeth were chattering, and my head was thumping. I thought, I suppose I'm ill really. Perhaps I'm going to die. Perhaps by the time we get to 'The Grapes' I'll be dead, and the man who wasn't sick won't know until he tells me to get out and I don't . . . And he'll get frightened because the police will think he's done it, and he'll drive to the bridge, and he'll throw my body over . . . only I'm not quite dead.

'No!' I said, feeling the slap as I hit the water.

The car slowed down.

'Am I going the wrong way, Blondie?'

'No . . . I just felt sick.'

'D'you want to get out?'

'No.'

'Don't be sick in the car, will you? You can't get the smell out of a car, not for long enough. That's why I don't take Charlie home now when he's drunk. I used to. I still walk him home, of course . . . Don't want him run in. He's a decent fellow underneath the soaking. In *his* place I wouldn't drown my sorrows . . . I'd knock her in the Old Kent Road . . . Still, we all have our own way of coming to terms with our troubles . . . I turn my back on mine, I suppose, go out and

about, have a drink, make a friend, even have a woman . . . But I still sleep at home. Don't ask me why. I suppose it's because I know she doesn't sleep until I'm in. Perhaps she doesn't sleep even when I'm in. I wouldn't know. I can't picture her eyes closed, ever . . . They'll be open when she's dead. . . .' He put his foot down heavily, and the car shot forward. 'Here! What am I talking about? And what do you care? And what does anybody care? Do I really care about Charlie? I say I do. When we've both had a skinful I believe it . . . But do I lose any sleep over Charlie? Let me tell you, I don't even lose any sleep over her, although I can see her through the wall, wide-eyed all through the night, waiting for Christ knows what!'

The man seemed very fed up. I thought, he wishes he hadn't offered to take me to 'The Grapes'. It's further than he thought. It's getting near closing time. He's missing his last drink.

I said: 'Shall I get out?'

'Feeling bad?'

'No. I just thought . . . Oh, it doesn't matter.'

'Let's have it. You just thought what?'

'You sounded fed up. I thought it was my fault.'

'Your fault! Bless your cotton socks, Kid, forget it! I'm a moaner, that's my trouble. I moan, and do nothing.' He nudged me and laughed. 'I shall be trotting out the corny one about my wife not understanding me in a minute! You've heard it before, haven't you? And you're so young you believe it, don't you?'

He didn't want me to answer. He swore at a man who crossed the road without looking for traffic.

'Yes, life's a scream all right. Passionate Percy, that was me . . . and she wasn't above a bit of slap and tickle before we were married either, though she'd never admit that now . . . She didn't want the baby, but when it came she couldn't think of anything else. Me . . .! I wasn't as much to her as the gas man . . . She did give him a cup of tea. And then the baby was run over . . . just like that . . . just turned three years

old . . . One minute, the whole house was geared to him, and the next. . . ' He stopped the car just short of the bus garage. 'Here! Why have I been telling you all this? I don't usually blab to strangers. I must have had more than I thought. Smell my breath! Is it like a sewer?'

'Yes,' I said.

He laughed so long, I got frightened in case he was mad.

He kept repeating 'Yes, she said' and going into fresh bursts of laughter, coughing and choking. 'I said "Does my breath smell like a sewer?" and she said "Yes"!'

I had to wait a long time for him to stop laughing. I was glad people were passing. I thought, if he's really crackers, I can scream, or blow the horn if he's got one, or smash the window with one of my flatties.

'After that, don't expect a goodnight kiss out of me, will you, Blondie? Here, we've known each other all this time and I haven't asked your name! Mine's Ted . . . Teddy . . . Teddy Bear! Oh no, you'll be introducing me to your dad as Mr Bear and that would want some explaining. Ted Dillon, that's me . . . at your service . . . call any time . . . go anywhere . . . Now, what about you? What's your name?'

'Kathleen. . . '

'Kathleen Mavourneen. . . ' He whistled a tune I didn't know. 'Kathleen . . . Well, how do you do, Kathleen?' I didn't know what to say. 'The answer to that is: "Very well, how's yourself?"' He looked at his watch. 'Damn it! It's after ten! No time for a drink! I don't know about you Kathleen, but my tongue feels like the bottom of a bird cage . . . I mean, of course, a sewer.' That started him laughing again, and by the time he had finished I was crying. He didn't notice. He got out of the car, came round to my side and helped me out.

'We'll nip across to "The Grapes" and see if we can catch your father, and if not I'll run you home.'

He held my arm as we crossed the road, squeezed it several times.

‘Life’s a scream, as I said before, Kathleen Mavourneen !  
Who would have thought that at precisely three minutes past  
ten, Teddy Dillon would have been taking a young blonde to  
“The Grapes” not to wet her whistle, but to find her daddy?’

IT seemed a very long way to 'The Grapes' from the car. I felt queer, as if I was walking on someone else's legs. If it hadn't been for Teddy Dillon's arm, I should have fallen. And if I had fallen, I'd have stayed there until they shovelled me up. I was so tired. All I really wanted to do was to lie down and die.

'Here . . . You're weak, Kid! Have you been ill, Kathleen?'

'Sort of. . . .'

'In hospital . . .?'

'Yes. . . .'

'That explains the milk in the coconut. What was the trouble?'

'They didn't say.'

'They never do . . . The only time they ever told me anything was when my mother was dying. They more or less said it was curtains.'

'The Grapes' was on a corner. The part fronting on the High Street looked empty. The doors were shut, the lights were out, and there was no noise. I panicked. I hadn't realized how much I was depending on seeing Dad. It was like arriving somewhere

after a very long journey and finding you were the only one on the train and there was nobody about, not even a man to take your ticket.

'Feeling sick again?'

'It's shut! He's gone!'

'Don't let that worry you, Kathleen. I can take you home or anywhere else you like. I've got a car. I don't have to clock in. No questions asked. She no care!'

We turned the corner, and there were three groups of people who had been turned out of the pub and were finishing their evening outside. Dad was there. It made me cry to see him. He was my dad, and I hadn't seen him for nearly six months. He was fond of me. He had told me he was the only time Mum had let him come to see me in the Home.

'I wouldn't have had this happen to you for worlds, Kathy . . . I can't believe it now . . . You're still the golden-haired lump that jumped on me in the mornings and spilled my tea in the bed . . . But I never gave you away, did I? I never let on to your mother it was you, did I? We had fun those mornings when she wasn't about, didn't we? You shouldn't have favourites among your children, but you're mine. Perhaps that's why this had to happen to you . . . Don't blame me for having you sent away, Kathy . . . I've been on my bended knees to your mother, begging her to let us stand by you, but she says the law wouldn't let it happen that way . . . But I'm not so sure . . . You might think being your father, I could keep you, but what can a man do in a job like this? Stands to reason a girl needs women about her. And your mother won't have you in the house . . . Women are hard on each other.'

Teddy pinched my arm.

'Where's this dad of yours, eh?' He saw I was crying, and he put his arm round me and said, 'You poor little devil, what's the trouble? Isn't your dad here? Won't I do? I'll be a father to you, if you like! I'm old enough to be, any road. My son would have been seventeen this year . . . You're not more than that, are you? Dry your tears . . . Haven't you

got a handkerchief? I threw mine away, rubbed you down with it after you'd been sick, remember? Yes, what say I'm your daddy? I'd like that . . . It would give me something to do besides booze . . . Mind you, you wouldn't have to give me an inch or I'd take a mile!

He let me go, and I walked towards Dad. He was looking my way, nodding his head at something one of the men he was with was saying. He could see me plainly in the moonlight. I stopped short of him, terrified in case he had forgotten me, or wouldn't recognize me, or had let Mum persuade him I was no good, and he must never speak to me again. . . .

But he did recognize me. He stopped in the middle of a nod, stared, his mouth open, shook his head, and after that I don't know. I was in his arms, and he was sobbing, and I was sobbing, and the two men he was with were sobbing. But I was happy, wildly happy. I wanted the moment to go on until the world came to an end, and there was nothing else to worry about, no nights, no days, no baby in a coffin. . . .

Dad kept saying: 'Kathy, oh Kathy!'

I heard Teddy Dillon speaking:

'Well, I'll be going, Kathleen . . . O.K. now?'

I sobbed to Dad: 'He was kind to me Dad. He wiped up after me when I was sick, and he brought me here in his car.'

Dad held out his hand.

'I shan't ever be able to thank you, Chum!'

'Forget it! It's thanks enough to see the reunion anyway. It nearly got me in the sob session, I can tell you, and I haven't cried since I was so high.' He lowered his voice, but I could hear quite distinctly: 'I'd get her home quickly if I was you. I found her being sick, poor little devil; as a matter of fact, it was outside the pub I use—you know it? "The Queen's Arm" down there by the Recreation Ground? Find me there any evening—Teddy Dillon's the name. Anything I can do, only too pleased.'

They shook hands several times, patted each other's shoulders. I thought, is this going on all night? Dad's two

friends shook hands with Dad, and patted his shoulder; and then they shook hands with Teddy Dillon and patted his shoulder and told him Dad was one of the best, do anything for anyone, buy anyone a drink any time. . . .

I said: 'Dad! I'm shivering!'

He said: 'We'll soon get you warm, Girl!'

And he went on with the back-slapping and the 'He's-a-jolly-good-fellows' till I could have screamed.

'Dad!' I said. 'Can't we go somewhere? I'm ill. . . .'

Dad said: 'You'll be all right! Pity you didn't come sooner before the pub shut. A nice drop of gin would have made you fighting fit.'

Teddy said:

'She's right, old man! You ought to take her home. She's under the weather. Here! What say I run you both home? Is it far? Not that I care if it's at the North Pole so long as the petrol lasts out . . . The night is young!'

I could tell Dad was worried.

'I can't take her home.' He pushed his hat back. 'This is a bit of a teaser, Kathy . . . When did you come out of hospital?'

'Tonight. . . .'

'Bit soon, wasn't it? I mean, I made your mother go and see you last Sunday and the baby was only just born. . . .'

'It was born Friday. . . .'

'That still makes it not a week old! I mean, the hospital ought to be ashamed of itself, discharging a young girl not a week after her baby's born. . . .'

'They didn't discharge me,' I said. 'I ran away.'

'Why?'

'I don't know . . . Dad, don't ask me questions . . . Get me to some place where I can lie down and get warm and. . . .'

Dad's friends said:

'Well, we'd better be getting. . . .'

'Look after yourself, Dave!'



Dad watched them walk unsteadily to the corner and there continue their talk.

'I don't know what to say, Kathy, I really don't.'

'What's the trouble?' Teddy asked. 'Why can't you take her home. My God, she ought not to be standing about here six days after having a baby . . . How old is she?'

'Fourteen, aren't you, Kathy? Or are you fifteen yet?'

'Christ!' Teddy Dillon exploded. 'Oh, Christ! Fourteen! Fifteen! And you're scratching your head about taking her home? Where else is she going? It makes me see red, old man! I had no idea she was that young! I thought seventeen, or as near as makes no matter, but. . . .'

I cried then. Teddy put his arm round me.

'It's all right, Baby! We'll get you to my car, and we'll wrap you up in a rug, and in no time you'll be in your own little bed at home and. . . .'

I said: 'You don't know Mum. Dad knows her. She won't have me home. If she takes me in, it will only be till the police come. . . .'

'Police? But you've not got into any trouble, have you?'

Dad explained:

'She had a baby . . . fourteen she was, and she's in the care of the Council on account of it. . . .'

'What about the man? Did they catch him?'

'Not that I know of,' Dad said. 'Mind you, I'm not sorry. What's the use? What's done can't be undone.'

'But to a kid of fourteen . . .! Dammit, man!'

I screamed: 'I'm cold! Why can't I go somewhere?'

Teddy said: 'Let's get the kid to my car and then we can talk.' We were about to move off when Teddy stopped me. 'There's a copper on the corner. Go on talking as if nothing had happened. Say anything. . . .' He raised his voice. 'We'll have to make it tomorrow, then, if you can't manage Sunday . . . Or what about Saturday?'

The policeman crossed the road slowly, pulled at a shop door, stared both ways then strolled out of our view. 'He's gone!'

Teddy said. 'Now we'd better get things straight, Kid. Could that copper knock you off, if I said I've got Kathleen Wotser-name here?'

'No.'

'You're wrong there, Kathy,' Dad said. 'He could, you know. I'm pretty sure he could even knock you off if you were at home with me and your Mum, and we couldn't do a thing about it. I've been into it all, so I know. I wanted my sister—that's your Aunty Dorothy—to have you; and she was willing until she found out she'd have to go to court and get this order putting you in charge of the Council washed out. Doll says that once you get to court, you never know . . . Yes, even I, your father, would have to go to court to regain custody, and they might say no and I couldn't do a thing.'

They forgot me again. They talked across me as if I was a corpse. Teddy was for telling the police and the Council and everyone else that England was a free country, and that I was his daughter and he would do what he damn well liked with me. And Dad said a lot about not being able to play with the police, and no use crying over spilt milk, and I'd be eighteen before I knew where I was and then I would be able to please myself.

They would have gone on all night if I hadn't said :

'I feel sick.'

I wasn't sick. I fainted on to Teddy. And when I came to, I was on a chair in the passage-way of the pub, taking sips of water from a woman.

'Better now, Ducks?' she asked.

Dad patted my hand.

'Ted's gone to fetch the car,' he said. 'Now you're not to worry about anything, do you hear?'

TED wrapped me up in a blanket and put me in the back of his car. I couldn't stop shivering. Ted kept putting the car light on and looking anxiously at me, while all Dad could say was :

'She'll be as right as rain in a minute !'

Ted had got a small bottle of brandy from the pub and an outsize wine glass with a short stem. Every now and then he made me take 'just one sip, Kid.' The first sip was like gulping fire. But by the third sip, I was feeling warmer, and sufficiently recovered to cry into the glass.

Ted winked at me :

'Getting rid of you alive, Kid, is worse than getting rid of a corpse ! I mean, for a corpse there's the river not far off . . . One, two and three and s—p—laash !' I didn't laugh. He tried again. 'Come on ! Let's have a laugh out of you ! You'll soon be dead ! In fact, if you don't soon get a bit of colour, I'll be ordering the coffin . . . and I'll go into the florists, and I'll say I want the best wreath they can make for a golden-haired girl. . . .'

Dad sank into his raincoat and said :

'I can't see the joke.'

Teddy said :

'No more can I, old man . . . But you might as well die laughing. I'm worried about your kid, plain worried. In your place, I'd see the red light. Women want care after having a baby, you know. I reckon you've got the choice between knocking your old woman silly and making her take the kid in, or having a funeral on your hands.' He turned to me, 'Take another sip, Kid! That's it! Before we've done with you, we'll turn you into a proper swiller . . . And don't take any notice of what we're saying. We'll think something up.'

Dad said :

'What about the mother and baby place, Kathy?'

'What about it?' I asked.

'Was it all right?'

'It wasn't bad . . . We had about sixteen girls there. One was only eleven. . . .'

'Don't tell me any more,' Dad said. 'We'll rule that place out . . . What about the hospital?'

Teddy said : 'What I don't get, Kathy, is why someone didn't stop you from running out of hospital. . . .'

'They didn't see me. I climbed out of a window.'

The car felt much warmer. I slept in snatches, and when I awoke and they were still talking I was happy with a sense of belonging. I was in a safe little world with two men caring about me, all wrapped in a rug that smelled of stale tobacco. One time when I awoke, I realized the car was moving. I knew panic then. They might be taking me to the hospital, or to the police!

'Stop the car! I don't want to go!'

Teddy stopped the car for a moment.

'We're only taking you for a ride round, Kid, while we think. We don't want some copper to notice we've been outside some shop for a long time, do we? We've thought of everything but where to take you. I'd take you home with me and chance it, but you'll need care for a few days, and my wife wouldn't give that . . . Don't misunderstand me. She's not unkind. She

just died fourteen years ago . . . Me, I can't live that way. Break your heart today, but smile tomorrow. If I couldn't do that I'd shoot myself.'

I was in no hurry. I was warm and sleepy. The two men's voices buzzed on like the bee in the classroom in summer. Being warm was everything. Being in this tiny space where no one could come on you without warning, no one could ask you questions, where you didn't have to watch while screens were put round beds in hospital to hide the terrible things that happened there. Johnny was going to buy me the white leather jacket to go with the hat. Johnny had white teeth and a Norton and he wanted me to go steady with him. Perhaps I would if I could always feel warm and safe like this. Johnny had stolen the money, but he would put it back. They wouldn't catch him, and if they did, I would write letters to him in Borstal telling him I would wait. . . .

The car was moving. I looked out, and saw that we were on Lambeth Bridge.

'One, two, three and s—p—laash! Simple! All over!' Teddy said. 'I reckon you'd better die, Kid!'

Across the water, I could see a name I knew: Simpson and Blundell. . . .

'Stop!' I said.

'Sick?' Teddy asked.

'No . . . It's that name—Simpson & Blundell. I know someone who works there.'

'We can't stop on the bridge,' Teddy said.

'Take me to that firm!' I begged.

'I'll take you anywhere you like, as long as the petrol lasts out,' Teddy said, making a signal with his right arm.

'We don't want to go down there at this time of night!' Dad said.

'Please take me there . . .' I begged.

We ran slowly past wharves stacked with timber, until we came to a yard with an iron gate across it and the words 'Simpson & Blundell' running down the side of the building.

'We'd better not stop here,' Teddy said. 'If there's a night watchman, he'll phone the police and say some suspicious characters are outside. . . .'

Teddy went very slowly past the gate, past the great sheds of stacked wood. I peered out, thinking of Johnny. If he ran out now, I'd scream 'Jump in!' and Teddy would step on it and we'd be speeding right out of London shaking off our pursuers before Johnny could gasp 'How did you know?'

But no figure came darting out. The place looked forgotten. There wasn't even a policeman to keep an eye on things.

I saw something then that made me catch at Teddy's shoulder :

'Look !' I said.

Teddy stopped the car, and all three of us saw a moving light on the top floor of the sawmills.

'What's worrying you?' Dad asked.

'That light . . . That's my friend . . . He works here . . . He told me he was going to put something back . . . Let's wait here, Dad !'

Dad said : 'I don't get you ! Put something back . . . ? Had he pinched something?'

'Yes . . . no. . . .' We all realized that a policeman had come out of a side turning opposite and was watching us. 'Let me get out, Dad ! There's a policeman . . . I've got to warn Johnny . . . He's seen that light . . . That's what he's standing there for . . . Let me get out !'

Teddy put his arm back and shoved me on to the seat.

'Be quiet !' he hissed. 'The copper's coming over . . . I'd better ask him something . . . the way to Dagenham will do . . . Cover yourself up. . . .'

I heard Teddy open the car door, and get out :

'Er . . . what a bit of luck for us ! I was just trying to find my map ! Are we right for Dagenham this way ? I thought out through East Ham, Barking. . . .'

'That's right, sir, but you're facing the wrong way . . . Go

back over the bridge, and along Millbank, on up to Blackfriars and. . . .’

‘I know my way from Blackfriars, thanks . . . It was crossing the bridge that dogged me.’

I could see the bottom half of the policeman while he talked to Teddy; but when Teddy got back into the car, the policeman bent down and looked in. I thought, the next question is going to be :

‘Are you Kathleen Purslowe?’

I thought I could open the far door and run for it, but then I remembered the cold outside and the way my legs had felt like somebody else’s.

Teddy fiddled with the controls, started up the car. . . .

‘Thank you! Goodnight. . . .’

And he went into reverse two or three times, all the time watched by the policeman. At last we were going back towards the bridge, with Teddy repeating ‘Phew!’ each time he touched his gear.

I CRIED at the thought of Johnny coming out of the factory right into the arms of the policeman. I was angry with Teddy and Dad. That was the difference between the old and young. The old only thought of themselves. The young would have found a way into the back of that wood place and warned Johnny. After we had crossed the bridge and were out of sight of the policeman, I tried to get out of the car.

‘I reckon she’s delirious, old man!’ Teddy said. ‘I mean, surely two ugly old devils like us can cough up a bed for a blonde? I’ve been wracking my brains . . . I know a lot of women through my work—good ones, and not so good ones, and they’ve all got houses and I daresay beds to spare . . . But I can’t think of one that I’d like to knock up at this time of night and say will you take in a sick kid, baby six days old, on the run from the police. . . .’

Dad said: ‘What about a cup of coffee, Kathy? We’re sure to find a stall somewhere. . . .’

‘I don’t want anything . . . I feel ill. . . .’

‘Here . . . Put my coat over you . . . and you’ll feel better.’

The weight of Dad’s coat made me shiver more at first, but



then I felt so warm that I snoozed. With every change in the car's pace, I awoke, but each time went to sleep again. The men were talking endlessly — Teddy asked questions about me and at every answer saying: 'Poor little kid!' or 'Poor little devil!' Teddy insisting that there wasn't a mother living who wouldn't take in her daughter in my condition; Teddy asking about 'the chap', and Dad saying you'd more likely get blood out of a stone than that out of me. Teddy repeating perpetually:

'I don't get it! I mean, I can understand the chap having a cut at her! The devil knows with a fair skinful I could have got cracking on her myself, believing she was seventeen or so . . . She's a lovely-looking kid. Properly turned out she could be an army's pin-up. But what I don't get and never shall is that the chap could leave her to it, leaving her holding the baby! And talking of the baby: what's cooking for that?'

'It's being adopted . . . Her mother fixed that. I suggested we gave a home to it! Did I get a rocket! Her mother is very bitter about her, can't hear her name without raising the roof, though I did get her to go up to the hospital to see the kid last Sunday by saying she could make certain about the adoption and all that. . . .'

I didn't care what they said about me, so long as we went on cruising in the car, the windows closed tight to keep the cold air out. I dreamt half-sleeping, half-waking of Johnny and the white leather coat and the white crash helmet that was in my locker at the hospital and I would never see again. I didn't mind the thought that I would never see it again. There was so much that I would never see again: the classroom where in memory it had always been a summer afternoon with the bee buzzing and Miss Tacey reading my essay and telling the class it had poetry, it had touched her as no child's work had ever done before.

I suddenly found myself talking to Dad. I told him about the cries of the girls at the Mother and Baby Home when labour began; about the dead baby in the coffin; about the cubicle in the hospital where I had died a thousand times before the baby was born.

Dad was crying, Teddy was going faster, and I told them about Johnny getting caught, and I said I didn't care, I didn't care if he was dead, if the baby was dead.

We stopped outside Auntie Dorothy's house.

Dad said : 'She's wandering, Teddy. . . .'

Teddy said : 'What say I knock this good lady up? I've got a way with ladies, you know. You've got to have a way with the ladies in my job if you want premiums as well as offers of cups of tea with quite a lot else thrown in.'

I watched Dad and Teddy walk up the tile path with its shell edging clear in the moonlight. They were there a very long time and nothing happened. I suppose they rang the bell, though I didn't hear it.

'Wait there for ever!' I said. 'I don't want to go in with Auntie Dorothy.'

A window at the top shot up.

'Hullo?' Auntie Dorothy called. 'Who's there? What do you want?'

Dad and Teddy came out of the porch and looked up.

'Can you come down a minute, Doll? It's urgent . . . This is a friend of mine, Doll, one of the best. . . .'

'What a time to call on anyone, Dave! I suppose I'd better come and see what's up!'

Dad came for me.

'Come on, Kathy! Your Aunt Doll won't turn you away. . . '

'Leave me be, Dad! I feel ill!'

'But you can't stay in Teddy's car all night!'

'Why can't I? I'll be better soon, and then I can go. . . .'

'Where to?'

'Somewhere . . . I could go to Larry Pearce, only I haven't got his new address.'

Dad heard the door open, and he rushed back up the path, and in the shaft of light from Aunt Doll's passage I could see Aunt Doll and Uncle Perce in their dressing gowns. Aunt Doll must have asked the men in; because soon the front room light went on, and I could see the four of them standing in the room.

They were talking about me. Much I cared so long as they didn't come out and make me walk up the path that the moon made wet.

'Please God let her say she won't have me ! Let her remember all my Mum has told her about me ! Let her rush out and say "Don't ever darken my door again !" like Mum did. I don't want to darken her door. I don't want to darken anyone's door ! I only want to be left alone !'

I didn't want to watch them, but I had to. They were standing in a ring under the electric light. Auntie Doll wasn't rushing at me, that was one good thing. She couldn't want me all that bad, or she'd have dragged me in before now. Dad had always maintained that Auntie Doll had a heart of gold, so that she would never see his children want if anything happened to their mother. Mum's answer had always been :

'H'm. Proof of the pudding is in the eating ! What's she ever done for one of my children bar sending a few tuppenny-ha'penny things at Christmas ? Heart of gold ! If she's all that fond of kids, why doesn't she have any of her own ? And don't come the old story with me that she can't have them ! She's too clever, your sister is, always has been, always will be !'

My neck ached with the effort of seeing them. So I said : 'What the hell ?' and pulled the blanket right up to my ears, and tried to think of something pleasant.

I told myself out loud :

'There was that doctor in hospital. He was nice. I could fall for him in a big way. What a lark if I became a nurse and met him on the ward, and we remembered ! He would wink at me, sure as eggs is eggs, and he'd say : "Haven't we met before, Nurse ?" and Sister would think he was making a pass at me, because I shall be as good-looking as Nurse Brown. And we'll both scream our heads off with laughter until he remembers there's a woman he's got to operate on, and we shall both dash off and save her life.'

That story warmed me. It was better than the tobacco-stinking blanket for warming me. It made me feel I was even

with Auntie Doll for taking so long to convince Dad she wouldn't have me. Why didn't she just say: 'Not on your nelly!'

Dad came out.

'She's making you a cup of tea, Kathy.'

'I don't want any tea.'

'I know, but come in just the same. My idea is that if she'll only keep you the one night . . . See what I mean? That would give us time to think . . . Come on.'

Uncle Perce came out, wearing a dressing-gown of large check pattern and a short coat round his shoulders.

'Wotcher! Come on in and have a cup of tea, Kathy . . . It'll warm you up!'

'I don't want any tea.'

'Don't want any tea! Don't be silly! Of course you want some tea! Come on in, Girl! I'm not exactly respectable, am I, out here in my night-shirt!'

Dad pleaded with me, and Uncle Perce pleaded with me. At last Perce put his face close to mine.

'You don't want to upset your Auntie Doll, now do you? She's making you a nice cup of tea, and you'd better go in and show willing. . . .'

I got out of the car, shivering now that my blanket and the coat were left on the seat. Uncle Perce took my arm and squeezed it, and told me that I had nothing to worry about, and with a cup of Doll's tea inside me and a bit of Doll's cake, well. . . .

When Auntie Doll saw me, she kissed me several times and cried because I looked so bad she wouldn't have believed it was me. Then she noticed the old flatties on my feet, and she sobbed that it broke her heart to see what I had come to through one little mistake . . . It was Teddy who separated us. He made me sit in one armchair, and Auntie Doll in the other, and he said we mustn't upset ourselves like this as it helped nobody. If I hadn't been so tired, I'd have asked him who was upset? I

wasn't, and the old flatties had got me out of hospital, so I should worry.

Teddy handed the tea round. You'd have thought it was his house the way he took charge. But Auntie Doll kept getting fresh bouts of sobbing, and Uncle Perce stood staring at her, himself looking a scream with his bony legs and enormous feet and his tiers of night-shirt, dressing-gown and jacket. And Dad sat staring at the floor, looking like he does when Mum is telling him off. Teddy winked when he gave me my tea.

Auntie Doll waved her hand at Uncle Perce, and he seemed to understand what she wanted and gave her a large handkerchief. She wiped her eyes, blew her nose, then said :

'Ta, Perce!' and gave him the handkerchief back.

'I'd do anything for you, Dave, you know I would. Perce knows I would, don't you, Perce? But I can't have her, Dave. She sobbed afresh but went on talking, her face swollen and ugly. 'I can't, Dave! I can't! Her mother ought to have her if anyone did. I mean, look at the state she's in! And only six days after! Anything could happen, and I'd be blamed for harbouring her.'

Teddy said :

'Fill up?'

Auntie Doll stared at me.

'You've been a very silly girl, Kathy, haven't you, and see where it has landed you!'

'I expect she's learned her lesson, Doll,' Perce put in.

'I don't know so much,' Doll said. 'They say it's like smoking. If you start young, you can't give it up.'

Dad said :

'All I wanted, Doll, was for you to keep her for one night. . . .'

'And what do I have to say to the doctor if she passes out and I have to call him in? Look at her colour! Just look at her! Women get fevers, you know, when they've had a baby, and some go off their heads . . . Take my advice, Dave, and put

her back into hospital, and then if anything goes wrong nobody can blame you. . . .'

'I'm not going back to hospital,' I said.

Auntie Doll came over to me and put her arm round me.

'Will you do something for me, Kathy? If you don't want to go to hospital, go back to your Mum and eat humble pie, and make a clean breast of everything, and you'll see, she'll have you back. I don't get on with your Mum, as you well know; but in her place, I reckon I'd act just as she does. I'd want to know who the man was for a start so I could put a spoke in his wheel. And I'd want you to promise to keep away from that Caff. The things I hear about that place! No wonder you got a baby! It's a wonder you didn't get quads, and all different fathers from what I know. . . .'

Ted looked at his watch.

'Blimey! Two o'clock! I shall get my cards!'

'Don't let your mother know you've been round here, Kathy,' Doll said.

Dad said: 'It's only for a few hours, Doll. . . .'

'I'd do anything for your children, Dave,' Doll sobbed.

Teddy said:

'Well, what's it to be?'

I suddenly felt sick, and Doll said:

'What did I say? That girl's very ill! If I had her here and she went that colour I'd ring the police before I had a death on my hands.'

Teddy took me outside and told me to be sick in the garden:

'You poor old girl! Only want to lie down and die, don't you? Don't mind me, Kid. Bring it all up . . . That's better, isn't it? It was the tea, I expect . . . Come on, in the car with you, and I'll tuck you up so you'll feel as if you've got an immersion heater in you.'

He made a fuss of tucking me in, telling me I was a grand kid, and whatever happened he'd stand by me. His voice became hoarse.

'Of course I'm mad, or drunk, but you're the best thing that's

ever happened to me. And you don't have to worry because well . . . because. . . ?

There was a lot more talk before we got away. Auntie Doll came out on to the pavement, sobbing that nobody knew what this was costing her to have to turn her own brother's daughter away, but to keep me in my present state was more than she dare do, and my mother wouldn't thank her, either, and she was sure it was the right thing to do, and in the end we would all be glad.

'Make a clean breast of everything, Kathy, and then you'll have nothing on your conscience. . . .'

Uncle Perce tried to get her in :

'You'll catch your death of cold, Doll,' he kept repeating.

And several times he went into a clinch with Teddy, shaking hands, saying 'Thanks, old man . . . I shan't forget it . . . Come and see us any time. Always welcome.'

But at last we were off.

'Phew!' said Teddy.

'It has quite knocked me back,' Dad said, 'though I can see Doll's point. What's her position if Kathy is taken really ill?'

'Come to that,' Ted said. 'What's our position?'

I let their talk flow over me. I knew they were taking me to Mum's, and because Teddy was there I didn't mind.

'You won't leave me?' I said suddenly.

Both men answered :

'Leave you!' and if I had said : 'You won't slit me up?' they couldn't have sounded more astonished.

T HIS time, Dad made me get straight out of the car.

'Once you're in, you're in,' he whispered. 'She can't turn you out. You're our daughter.'

Of course I said : 'I don't want to ! Go away !' But I did want to, deep down. I had queer feelings when the car stopped outside our house. I didn't quite sob, but my breath came in jerks, and everything about the place crowded in on me, and the bad things seemed good. I could see the fence round our long narrow garden which had made me feel like a caged animal when Mum had refused to let me go out into the street to play and had demanded to know : 'What's wrong with the garden ?' Answering her now in my sobbing breaths, I said : 'Nothing's wrong ! Nothing's wrong !' I saw her talking endlessly to Mrs Hall next door and blaming me because I hadn't the sense to turn the gas down under the potatoes when I hadn't even known they were on. My sobbing breath said : 'Blame me ! Blame me ! Blame me for everything ! It's all my fault ! Only let me come in, and creep into my side of the bed with Tina !'

I shivered, remembering what it was like to feel Tina's hot body close to mine, remembering that however much Tina and I quarrelled, we always spent the night cuddled close.



The creaking gate worried Dad. He made Teddy and me creep up the path, and he fumbled with his key as fearfully as if he were in the act of robbing a bank and expecting any minute to find a police torch flashed on him.

I cried when we got into the passage. I couldn't stop the great sobs that were forced out of me at the walls of home closing in on me.

'Hush! You'll wake your mother!' Dad pleaded.

The moonlight shining in at the landing window lit up the more familiar part of home behind the passage curtains and made it the heaven I knew it was. This part we three were groping along was the part of the house not really 'home', the part used only at Christmas and for visitors who were too posh or too nose-y to be allowed beyond the passage curtains into the untidy, noisy, loving, hating, cursing, boring life that was home.

Dad whispered :

'Better go into the front room! You know what your mother is if anyone strange goes into her kitchen! In here, Teddy . . . Wait a minute: I'll switch the light on . . . Only don't make a noise. The missis sleeps just above here, and she sleeps with one eye and one ear working at double strength.'

Dad switched the light on, and at once the months I had been away disappeared. Nobody had been in the room since the Welfare Officer had taken me home to collect my clothes . . . There was the dent I had made in the armchair when I had had to lie there so long saying: 'I don't know, I don't know, I don't know.' There was ash in the brass ash tray, and it looked just like the ash that Miss Hamson had dropped on to the table and said 'Oh dear!' and scooped it up and put it into the tray. I could have cried aloud with joy. Nothing had changed. If Mum had cleaned the front room since I was there, it didn't show. I was fiercely glad. I found myself saying to some invisible and unknown beings :

'I don't care what you say! It's my home! It's mine! And it will always be like this for ever and ever amen!'

Dad whispered to Teddy :

'D'you know what I've been thinking, Teddy? If Kathy can sneak up to bed and get right in without waking her mother, that's all we want, isn't it?'

'Sounds a good plan to me.'

'I expect her mother would keep her in the end . . . but we don't want a scene, do we, and women do like playing their scenes out. No, I'm not worried about what Kathy's mother will do in the end. It's what she'll do in the beginning. She plays her scenes big, and I couldn't face one now. All I want is to hit the hay, and I bet that goes for you too. But we gotta see Kathy's all right first. What do you say to that, Kathy? Will you sneak upstairs as if you were a ghost, and get into your bed without waking young Tina? Because Tina's only got to breathe different and your mother's out of bed. . . .'

I thought of being in bed with Tina, and it was such happiness, my head whirled and I had to steady myself on the cocktail cabinet Mum had said was the making of the room though it had never had a cocktail in it. I felt myself slipping into my bed, a hair's breath at a time, my heart beating as if I had run up twenty hills piled on top of each other. Cold sheets, ice-cold sheets at first, and then a hint of warmth, but only a hint. Still miles to creep, but miles of getting warmer until at last my belly and thighs were cupping Tina's bottom, and I would know I would never be cold again, never be afraid, never want to do anything but what I was doing.

'Better take your mac off, Kid,' Teddy said. 'Those plastic things can sound like a wind machine.'

He helped me take off my mac, and stared at the ugly green overall and the bulging old skirt and pyjama trousers showing below.

Dad said :

'Surely they're not your only clothes, Kathy?'

Teddy said :

'When I escaped from prison in Korea, I didn't stop to put my Sunday suit on.'

Dad said :

'But the Council has had her for six months, and I've been paying for her, which is another sore point with her mother.'

Teddy whispered to me :

'Take off everything but your pyjamas, Kid, shoes as well . . . And if you want to go to the bog, I wouldn't pull the chain. If it's anything like ours at home, it'll waken this street, the next and the one after *and* a few of the latest arrivals in the cemetery too. Here, step out of your shoes . . . No noise!'

Dad opened the door very gently.

'Give us a kiss,' he said. 'And don't worry about anything. I'll take your mother up a cup of tea in the morning. That always gets her. And I'll tell her such a tale that, well . . . she'll let you come back home and have a fresh start. . . .'

Teddy put his arm round me :

'Don't I get a kiss?' I kissed him. 'I shan't forget tonight, Kid. And you mustn't either. If I can help you at any time, I will . . . And I mean *help*. No strings to it. All above board. Teddy Dillon has never claimed to be a saint. Teddy Dillon's eye wanders often. But we can all rise above ourselves at times, and Teddy Dillon is no exception. Sleep tight, Kid . . . and if the bugs bite, well, live and let live I say!'

I crept past Dad, on to the black wool slip rug at the foot of the stairs. I got on to the first stair, one foot then two feet, as I had done as a child . . . I was fearful, yet excited to the point of bursting. The second stair creaked badly. I turned to make signs to Dad and Teddy that I couldn't help it. The third stair creaked even more. I hesitated. At this rate, Mum would catch me half way and I'd never reach Tina. If I ran for it, even if I woke her up, so long as I was in bed she couldn't drag me out . . . I could pretend I was very ill. I could act silly. . . .

A light was switched on from above.

'Is that you?' my mother called.

I turned back, jumped the three stairs in my terror, and found myself shivering in Teddy's arms.

THE three of us went into the front room and sat down waiting for Mum.

'Is that you? Who's there? Dave?'

Dad called: 'Yes, it's me. It's O.K.'

'What time do you call this?'

Dad's forehead puckered. He shook his head, hunched his shoulders, held out empty hands to Teddy.

'Perhaps I'd better go?' Teddy said. 'I mean, one of the rolling pins might hit me.'

'No!' I said. 'Don't go . . . She won't let me stay. She doesn't like me. She only likes Tina.'

'That's silly talk, that is,' Dad said.

'Shall I sit outside in the car?' Teddy was asking when Mum appeared, her hair in grips all flat to her head, her dressing-gown flung round her shoulders showing her crumpled night-dress. When she saw Teddy and me, she looked angry:

'Why didn't you tell me there was someone here?'

'This is Teddy Dillon, Ethel . . . He's been very good to us. He's been helping us.'

'Helping you to what?' Mum asked, and then she turned on me. 'What are you doing here?'

'She ran away from the hospital, Ethel. . . .'

'Then she can run back . . . I've never heard of such a thing! You gave me the fright of my life! I thought I was going to be murdered in my bed. What did you run away for?'

'I don't know. . . .'

'I thought that was coming, my girl. I don't know is all we ever get out of you, isn't it? You didn't know you were in trouble, did you? You didn't know who did it, or how old he was. It made me look such a fool in front of those ladies from the Council. It made it look as if you just went with any Tom, Dick or Harry. . . .'

'Ethel!' Dad said. 'Will you do me a favour? The kid's ill . . . It isn't a week yet since she had the baby, and she has been sick and fainted tonight . . . Let's put her to bed . . . You and me can argue all night, but she ought to be in bed.'

I could see Mum wasn't going to let me stay. I could see it in the way she stared at Dad, letting him talk, letting him hang himself.

Teddy said :

'I'm sorry I'm here, Mrs Purslowe, but. . . .'

'So am I sorry!' Mum snapped back. 'I don't know who you are, and I don't want to know who you are. If you've had anything to do with bringing my daughter here in this state then you'd better get out quick before I ring the police. Because I *am* ringing the police! That girl is not in my care any longer. And she's not in her father's care. She brought all this on herself. Oh I know she looks pathetic, wrings your heart, she looks so young and innocent. And I don't doubt she has taken you in. But I've seen all this coming since she was thirteen. She mixed with all the riff-raff she could rake up. She was always up at that blasted cafe, which ought to be burnt down. She never once told me the truth about anything—swore she was here when she was there, and was with this one when she was with that one . . . And twice she was out all night, and I begged and prayed of her to tell me where she had been and who with. I would have stood by her, whatever she had done. It's

a mother's place to stand by her children. But she has never given me a chance, never confided in me. And, shall I tell you why? Because she's shielding that rotter . . . because she doesn't intend to give him up. You mark my words : if I had her back as her father thinks I should, within a fortnight she'd be up to her old larks, and within a month she'd be carrying again, and making me the talk of the neighbourhood !'

She went on and on like river water. The two men looked like little boys who were being told off by a teacher. I felt happy. I was used to this. This was Mum. This was home. If she hadn't said a word, it would have broken my heart. As she talked, I felt less and less tense. In the end, after she had said it all, and said it all again, she would tell me to go upstairs and not to make any damn row or I'd get the length of her tongue . . . And I would be able to pull the chain without fear. And then I would get in beside Tina. And this time, getting my body against hers would be swift, because it wouldn't matter if Tina woke. If she did, I would say :

'It's all right. It's me . . . Kathy . . . come home.'

I realized that they were rowing. Dad was saying that if Mum turned me out, he would go too. And Teddy was 'Mrs Purslowing' her, and repeating : 'It's only an hour or two till morning, and then we can think.' The talk was like a ball going from one to the other. I wanted them to talk, even to row, because all the time they were doing it I was still at home . . . I thought of the morning, when I would get up, and Mum would be bad-tempered, even with Tina because Mum hates the world every morning. That was home, and if ever I said I didn't want to be home, then I ought to have had my brains tested. All I wanted was to stay home for ever.

Teddy said :

'Thanks, Mrs Purslowe. Believe me, I know just what you must be feeling. But I don't think you'll regret keeping her tonight. In a few hours time, we'll all be fresh. I'm sort of my own master, and I could come round any time you liked and

run you anywhere. Back to hospital is what I would say. But let her feel you are standing by her tonight. . . .’

Mum cried at his praise of her, shook his hand, said she was sorry she hadn’t been very friendly at first but she was sure he would understand, and she saw him to the door, and he kept saying, ‘Forget it, Mrs Purslowe!’

While Mum was at the door, Dad smiled at me. He looked terribly tired, but he looked happy.

‘I told you everything would be all right, didn’t I? You had better go upstairs quietly before your mother changes her mind . . . Give us a kiss . . . Goodnight, old chum!’

Mum was closing the door on Teddy Dillon when the third stair creaked. She looked round and saw me.

‘Where are you going?’

‘Upstairs to bed . . . Dad said. . . .’

‘I daresay your dad did say . . . But you come right back here, my girl. Your father can make you up a bed in the front room. I’m not having my two innocent girls disturbed, and I don’t want them to have a chance of knowing anything about you. So far, thank God, I’ve kept it from them . . . They think you’ve been in a mental hospital, and I’ll see they go on thinking it, whatever the kids at school may whisper to the contrary.’

I HAD felt so tired, but I couldn't sleep on the front room couch. The blankets were rough to my face. Sometimes when I turned over they fell to the floor. At other times, I seemed to wind myself into the blankets as I turned over and over and the struggle to get free of them made my head ache. For some time after Mum and Dad had gone to bed in the room above me, I could hear their voices, not what they said but the buzz of them. I thought, poor old Dad, fancy having to lie in bed with Mum on the nag!

It seemed to get light very soon. I was still unwinding myself, struggling, panting, when I realized I could see all the familiar objects in the room. I lay tracing the pattern on the back of the settee, tracing the pattern on the wall.

I went out to the toilet in the garden, and though I shivered from cold, the air on my face felt like someone petting me. I could smell leaves and dampness. Against the grey sky, Mum's prop looked wintry. The concrete of the path to the toilet felt damp to my bare feet, but once I had danced on it when the sun had made it so warm you could hug it. ('Stop throwing yourself about like a cat on hot bricks, Kathy! Anyone would think you'd got St Vitus's Dance!') It seemed a lovely garden



to me as I stood there, shivering, and had I really wanted to push the fences out . . . out . . . out . . . till they reached the sea . . . or the Caff? There was the incinerator Mum had rowed Dad for buying: 'Waste of money! What's wrong with burning up your leaves in a heap like everybody else in the road does?' I could suddenly see why Dad had wanted that incinerator. It would be like a fire all to himself. He would be able to warm himself at it, to watch its glowing heart, to sneak out to give it food . . . bits, pieces, anything to keep it alive! There was the water butt that Mum had said was a 'crying disgrace'. All the other water butts in the neighbourhood had nice coats of paint to preserve them. But not ours! Oh no! Ours would rot before anyone would spare an hour from the pub to put a spot of paint on it. I touched the still flaking green-brown paint of the water butt . . . knowing it would be warm. . . .

As I stood there, shivering but happy, I saw a tiny splash in the water butt and then another and another. Pin-pricks of rain danced on the surface. I caught one spot on my tongue as I had always tried to do as a little girl. To catch a raindrop on your tongue was lucky, and the luck lasted all that day.

I realized that the silver streaks in the sky had been wiped out. Now there was only a heavy grey that seemed very near. The garden looked sad . . . I thought, it's saying goodbye. I shan't be lucky today. Mum will get up in her usual morning bad temper, and she will look hate at me, and at Dad, and even at Tina and Jeannette and the cat. She'll tread on the cat and be glad: 'Serves you right for getting under my feet!'

And then she will get dressed in her best costume, and she'll make her face up, and she'll scrabble in the drawer for her gloves and make me feel I've had them. And she won't say where she's going. But I will know, and Dad will know, and Dad will look as if he is going to cry. And he'll shake his head when she isn't looking and whisper: 'A man's so lost in a job like this, Kathy . . . God knows I'd stand by you if I could, but what can a man do? What do I know about whether you're three months, or five months, or any months at all?'

The door would slam, and we'd both know where Mum had gone. And we wouldn't let on we were waiting for her to come back with a policewoman, or to come back alone, knowing the policewoman was going to come as soon as she had had her breakfast. Tina and Jeanette wouldn't know. They would go on arguing about who had had the comb last, and accusing each other of taking one white sock: 'You did!' 'I didn't!' 'You did!'

The pin-pricks of rain on the surface of the water in the butt ceased, and I looked round the garden. The prop was like a forbidding finger: 'Don't you dare!'

When I went back into the house, I listened to the quiet and it sounded good to me. Up in the front bedroom in the big double bed, Mum would be lying on the far side and Dad nearer the door because Mum was frightened some murderer would get in and cosh her before she had time to think. Dad would be snoring. I had watched him often when I had taken up his tea . . . and I always felt sorry for him in a nice kind of way. Mum didn't snore, of course. Mum hated Dad's snoring, said it wasn't fair to her, said if it went on she would have to do something or she would be in a mental home. ('If you'd turn on your side, like I'm always telling you to, you wouldn't snore. But no! You have to sleep flat on your back and you sound like a yard of pigs!') In the back bedroom, Tina would be in our bed—the big double one under the window that you could only make lying flat on it; and Jeanette in the bed that was now so small for her that her feet hung out of the end. Listening to the house, I could feel them breathing. I breathed with them. They were me!

In the dim light, I could see clothes hanging on the hall-stand—Tina's blazer, Tina's school skirt, Tina's school raincoat, even Tina's black slip-ons. I could just imagine Tina rushing in from school, frightened because Mum would tick her off for being late, throwing off her school clothes in a frenzy and dragging on her 'best' dress to make Mum think she had been in for hours. Jeanette didn't have to change her clothes

when she came in. She only went to an ordinary school and could wear anything.

I went back into the front room, and suddenly I wasn't home. The blankets falling off the settee looked wrong, looked what Mum called 'slomicky'. In this room I didn't breathe with those upstairs. They breathed together, I breathed alone. They didn't want me. They didn't like me. They never had liked me. They were all right when I wasn't there.

I realized I was cold. I found a sweater of Tina's on the hall box and I put that on, and then I put on Tina's skirt and Tina's blazer and Tina's shoes. I wanted to go into the kitchen to get a drink, but I was afraid Mum would hear the water flowing. I felt excited as I crept to the front door, and almost silently eased the bolt and turned the knob. It was Tina's clothes that excited me. I felt like Tina. I was Tina, and if only I could see myself in a glass, I'd see that my fair almost straight hair had become Tina's reddish-looking curls that Mum was so proud of . . . And even if I wasn't Tina, I was myself, the me before Mum knew the baby was coming; because Tina's school uniform was just like mine only mine was green and hers brown. Mum had asked if Tina could go to a different grammar school from me. She said Tina would have a better chance that way.

I didn't feel a bit like a runaway as I walked up the quiet street, leaving Mum's front door open. She would be mad about that, accusing me of wanting to get her hacked to pieces in her bed. But if I had shut the door behind me, she would have heard it, and then she would have wakened every other house in the street and every policeman I passed would be looking for a girl in brown. At least now the street could go on for a couple more hours, waiting for the first milk van to come.

With my hands deep in Tina's pockets, and comforted by the feel of what remained of Tina's fares, I was happy. I couldn't have explained my happiness. It was partly the feel of the air on my cheeks, partly the peace with only a very occasional car passing and no pedestrians, partly the feel of Tina's clothes, almost as good as the feel of Tina in bed. And I

had money. I didn't know how much. There were several coins, and one at least was a sixpence and one with a milled edge pretty certainly two shillings. I would be able to get on a bus when one passed. I would be able to buy something to eat if I got hungry. I wasn't hungry, only thirsty, so thirsty it was almost a pain.

I saw a policeman standing on a corner, and panicked. First, I hid in a doorway, and when he didn't come after me, I crept along the fronts of shops into doorways, waiting, creeping until I reached a turning off the main road, and then I ran faster than I have ever run before. I was so tired when I reached the end of the road that I had to sit on a coping to recover.

A man passed.

'Couldn't you sleep?' he asked, stopping.

'I'm waiting for someone,' I said. 'School friend . . . I thought I was late, so I ran, and now I'm just waiting.'

I walked on. People began to hurry out of houses. They all said: 'Good morning!' or 'Nice morning!' or 'I overslept!' I didn't know what to say, so I just hurried by.

I saw a milk van stop. I heard the rattle of bottles. I saw a man with a white coat and striped apron. He said:

'Good morning!' and then seemed to see something in me he hadn't expected. 'You're out early!' I thought, he seems suspicious. He'll tell someone he has seen me, and. . . .

'I came out to get milk,' I said. 'I wondered if you could oblige. . . .' Mum always asked people if they could oblige.

He laughed.

'I'm always ready to oblige a lady,' he said. 'Pint?'

'Half,' I said, and seeing he looked as if that wasn't the right answer, I said: 'It's just for a cup of tea, nothing else.'

He gave me a small bottle, and I gave him my sixpence and pocketed the change. He said:

'You're all right, aren't you?'

I didn't answer. I walked on, feeling afraid to run in case he ran too. But as soon as I heard his engine start up, I ran as if he were behind me—down this turning, across the road, down

the next turning. A road that hadn't got a turning made me cry. It was unlucky.

I came to the High Road near the station, and in an alley-way between two shops where Johnny and I had kissed our goodbyes on many a night, I drank my milk. It was so good I cried. My throat and mouth had been burning, and it cooled them like lumps of ice I had sucked. I put the bottle down against the grimy brick wall where Johnny had leaned talking until I teased him into pulling me against him. I could hear him saying unhappily :

'We didn't ought to, Kathy, not really . . . if my Dad ever found out. . . .'

I could hear my laugh :

'Why should your Dad ever find out, Johnny, tell me that? Why should anyone ever know?'

The voices in that alley-way told me where I was going. I was going to Simpson & Blundell where Johnny worked, I would wait till I saw him going in or coming out, and he would see me, and he would be pleased because Johnny liked me. He would have his Norton with him and he would say : 'Get set !' and in no time we would be tearing up the town, roaring out of London, and I would whip him, and I would scream to beat the lashing wind : 'Faster ! Faster, Johnny !' and I'd beat him till the trees came at us and the sky came to meet us as we went up the hill.

IT was only a few hours since Teddy Dillon had driven very slowly past Simpson & Blundell's, and I had seen the light of Johnny's torch. Then all had been quiet. Now a fat little man with grey hair was sitting in a box, and men hurried by with a 'Just made it, Fred!' or 'Thank God it's Friday, Fred!' or just 'Hi!' A lorry loaded with timber swung out and caused a car in the main road to mount the pavement a few inches from me.

I waited, watching men on cycles, men on motor bikes, men dropped from cars passing in. It didn't seem possible that so many men could work in that smallish yard, and none of them Johnny.

I got worried about Johnny. Something must have happened to him. He hadn't gone in. I was certain of that. I had watched every person going in or coming out. Suppose they had caught him last night? Suppose he was in prison. What would I do? There was the Caff I could go to, but I couldn't sleep there. Of course there was always Larry Pearce. Larry liked me a lot. In some queer way, Larry liked me more than Johnny did. There was something heavy and everlasting about Larry's liking, though. It was suffocating. You knew it wouldn't stop, or

turn on someone else. It was like some great prowling thing, and once you had said 'O.K.' you would never get away alive. Merle and Susan wouldn't help me. They wanted to be just the two of them, having a fellow here and there, but always going back to each other.

I crossed the road, thinking I would ask the man in the box if Johnny Park had gone in. And then I saw Johnny, doing a kind of running walk because it had already gone seven. I cried with happiness. I went towards him, and barred his path just away from the main gates.

'Johnny! It's me! I thought you were never coming! I would have died!'

He stared. He didn't smile. He looked as if he wished he hadn't seen me. I said:

'Johnny! It's me! I've been waiting for you!'

'I'm late for work, Kathy. . . .'

'You can't go to work, Johnny! What about me?'

'I've got to go to work, Kathy. . . . I tell you what: I'll see you at dinner time, eh?'

'No you won't, because if you leave me now, I'll never see you again. . . .'

'Why aren't you in the hospital?'

'I ran away. . . . I ran to be with you. . . . I've got no place, Johnny. I've got nobody but you. . . .'

'I'll take you back to the hospital. . . . I will, I tell you. You look ill. . . .'

'Johnny. . . . I ran away because. . . . because I didn't want them to tell me the baby was. . . .'

A whistle blew.

'Kathy! I've got to go!'

'You can't Johnny. You can't! If you do, I'll throw myself in the river, and I'll drown, and you'll be blamed.' I could see he was hesitating. 'I never told anybody about you, Johnny. Nobody knows. . . .'

'My Dad knows. . . .'

'Your *Dad*?'

'Yes . . . I told him last night. I had to, Kathy. It all came out about that money. I mean, after I left you, I realized just what I had done. I must have been mad . . . And I knew I would never get the money back myself. So I told Dad . . . only about the money. I didn't intend to tell him anything about you, honestly, but he was terribly cut up about the stealing, terribly, and I like my Dad, you see, and he kept saying : "What did you want the money for, Johnny?" And in the end, I came clean, and do you know what he did? He broke down ! He sobbed like a kid ; I've never seen my Dad cry, and it was terrible . . . and all because of me . . . And then he said I'd got to promise faithfully never to see you again. And I promised.'

He was crying and so was I, and we stood staring at each other.

'I promised !' he repeated.

I wanted to comfort him.

'Seeing me now doesn't count, Johnny, because I made you.'

'I see what you mean,' he said.

We stood there. I was waiting for him to go, and he didn't. We were right in the middle of the pavement. One or two men jostled by us, and one said :

'You'll get your cards, Johnny !'

'You'd better go, Johnny,' I said.

'What about you ?'

'What about me ?'

'I mean, where are you going ?'

'Nowhere, I've got nowhere, Johnny. I told the truth. Mum won't have me, and Aunt Doll won't . . . I suppose I could find Larry Pearce and . . .'

'It's all my fault,' Johnny cried.

'It's not, Johnny. . . .'

'But it is . . . And Dad ought not to make me promise not to see you. I would promise not to do anything . . . you know what I mean . . . But . . . The baby is all right ?'

'I don't know.'



'You've let it go, I suppose, running away?'

'I've let everything go . . . The white crash helmet is in my locker, and I'll never get that now, and I liked it better than anything I've ever had . . . Johnny . . . our baby might be dead.'

Johnny said :

'What makes you say that?'

'The other one died.'

'Ours might not.'

'It will.'

'What would they do with it, now you've run away, if it didn't die?'

'Let that woman have it, I expect.'

'Would she have it already?'

'She might. . . .'

'Perhaps she'd let us see it . . . Where does she live?'

'She told me. It's where the river is so wide it looks like the sea. It's at Chelsea. I don't know the number, but we could ask people. I mean, it's right upstairs, and the view is wonderful, and the water looks white. She told me all that.'

Johnny took my arm.

'Let's go and find it, eh? Even if we can't see each other any more, we can both see the baby, and. . . .'

'What about your promise?' I said.

He shrugged his shoulders, and we began walking away from the wharf.

'You'd have promised in my place, Kathy. I mean, he *sobbed*! He's not like me. He's not one to cry. He went all through the war, and he was a prisoner in Japan, and I bet whatever they did to him he didn't cry. And the Japs tortured people, didn't they? But *I* made him cry. It wasn't the stealing. He was upset about that, of course, because he's a foreman in the place. But for stealing he could have belted me, he said, and knocked some sense into me. But telling him about the baby . . . He said he couldn't believe it. He said he wouldn't believe it. He said granted I'd gone a fair way with you, but

he didn't believe it was my baby. He said if it was, you'd have made trouble for me before this. He said you'd have got a paternity order out against me. He said any girl would.'

The wharves had ended, and we were walking the embankment now, following the river that passed Mrs Sleeman-Evans's house. It looked greyish-brown to me, and I wondered how it could ever look white. I was happy again. I was tired, and I wished Johnny would let me sit on some steps leading steeply down to the river bed. I would lean against him, and perhaps go to sleep while he talked.

'Dad isn't going to tell Mum about it. He said it would kill her.'

The world seemed to have awakened suddenly. Streams of cars and buses passed us and hurrying people jostled us, some tut-tutting because we walked slowly. Every so often Johnny would remember something about his father.

'Dad hasn't gone to work this morning. He's gone round to the doctor. He had indigestion, like a knife, he said.'

'Dad took the money back last night. He told the night watchman he had forgotten his pay packet, and he was passing and he thought he would get it. Of course old Smithy trusted him. Dad's got a wonderful name at the firm.'

'Dad said it isn't my baby. And I'm never to admit it.'

We leaned on the parapet, and I was glad. I didn't care what Johnny said so long as he let me rest. He repeated what he had said before we stopped.

'Dad said it isn't my baby. And I'm never to admit it.'

I said :

'O.K. Don't admit it. And what does it matter if it's dead.'

'I wish it wasn't dead, Kathy.'

'Why? Your dad would be glad if it was dead, wouldn't he?'

'I haven't promised not to see the baby,' Johnny said. 'Only not to see you.'

'You might see me in the Caff,' I said.

'I'm not allowed to go to the Caff any more. Dad says everybody in the neighbourhood says that Caff ought to be shut and

he believes them now. He says that if he ever catches me there, he'll belt me within an inch of my life.'

'Won't you *ever* go to the Caff?'

'I don't suppose so.'

We talked of sad things, but we didn't really feel sad. We walked together, or leaned for a while on the parapet, our shoulders touching, and all the sadness was unreal, and the real part was the water slapping at the steep wall and tossing great barges as if they were toys.

When we were so near Chelsea that Johnny could point it out, he said :

'There's a Caff I once went to with Larry Pearce . . . We could go there and get a cup of tea. . . .'

'I'd like that,' I said.

'We might even see Larry Pearce there. It's near where he lives. And Larry would know what we ought to do. Larry would help us, especially you. I told him about the baby the day before yesterday, and he went all thin . . . But yesterday he said nothing was changed, and that if you ever wanted help. . . .'

Soon we were facing each other across a marble top table, and I was trying to make Johnny smile at me so that I could see his white film-star teeth.

'I wish your dad hadn't made you promise not to see me any more, Johnny, don't you?'

He didn't smile. He looked ever more miserable.

'I've been looking for you ever since you didn't come to the Caff any more. Funny isn't it? I couldn't forget you. I wanted to go straight and going steady with you was going straight, if you see what I mean. And now I know about the baby, it makes it straighter than ever. But. . . .'

I blew on my tea to make it cool enough to drink.

'I'm glad you still like me, Johnny,' I said.

WE stayed a long time at the Caff. I didn't eat. I kept feeling sick. But Johnny had a cake and two cups of brown tea, and I only had one cup of tea and couldn't take more than a sip at that. There was no juke going in the cafe, but I didn't mind. I felt quiet. I felt sometimes as if Johnny and I and the table and the chair were floating on the sound of the other people in the Caff.

But I was happy, so happy it wasn't easy to breathe deeply enough. Johnny wasn't as happy as I was because he kept remembering what his father had said, but the longer we stayed, the more he got to like me. He kept staring at me and saying :

'I want to go steady with you, Kathy !' as if he was going to cry.

He said if he had done a murder, his dad couldn't have been more mad. He said his dad really did look ill this morning because he had been worrying about it all night with no one to talk to. He said it was the first thing his dad had kept from his mother in all their married life, but it had got to be done because it would kill his mother if she knew.

Every time Johnny remembered that he had promised his father he would never see me again, he said things like :

'I wanted to go steady with you, Kathy. I kept waiting about for you. I waited in the Caff. I waited in the street. I stayed away from work once and waited outside your school. And then I waited outside your house, and your mother said that if I didn't go away she'd call the police. Nobody said you were going to have a baby. All they said in the end was that you had gone to hospital—to a mental hospital with a breakdown.'

We left the Caff, and we walked along the embankment. Johnny took my arm, and said that he would never forget me, and that he would buy me that white coat I wanted. And if I had lost the other crash helmet, he'd buy me another one, and his father couldn't stop him spending his money the way he wanted. He said he didn't know how he was going on without ever seeing me. He said he didn't see how he could keep his promise. He said he would want me till the day he died.

The river wasn't very wide just where we were, so I knew that couldn't be where Mrs Sleeman-Evans lived. Where we were, you could see Battersea Park on the other side quite clearly, and even if it was misty you would never believe you were at the sea. I told Johnny, and he said I was right, and that the only part he knew where the river got so wide it might look like the sea from some angles was the other side of Battersea Bridge. He said it wasn't far, but it seemed a very long way to me. Johnny asked wasn't I so well. I said I wasn't so well, but I'd be all right once we got there.

When we got to the point where the river widened, I felt excited. I said to Johnny :

'This is it ! This is where the river widens, and there's so little on the far side that it wouldn't show through a mist !'

The parapet here was low enough to sit on. We sat side by side, our legs dangling over the mud from which the river had withdrawn. It must have been just after bath time for the birds. Several swans and ducks were combing their feathers, and sparrows were finding food in the mud.

To our right were all kinds of houseboats. On the one nearest, a line of napkins was drying :

'They must have a baby there, Johnny!' I said. I studied the boat. It was like a world in miniature, even to a kind of street lamp. 'It would be lovely to live on a boat.'

We didn't talk much then. Johnny had said it all, I suppose, and he looked as if he was going over it all again in his own mind and it didn't make him happy. He stirred himself at lunch time, and took me into a shop nearly opposite and Johnny had a milk shake and a packet of crisps. I had a milk shake. I wasn't hungry. I was still thirsty, and still felt on fire in my throat. This time, we sat on high stools at a counter, and we leaned on our elbows. We didn't say it, but we knew that nothing could go on for ever, that soon Johnny would have to join the crowds going home after work.

'Of course,' Johnny remarked. 'If anyone happens to see Dad and tell him I'm not at work, he'll be waiting for me with the buckle end of his belt. Dad thinks that settles everything.'

'You're frightened of him really, Johnny,' I said.

'So would you be. He believes in thrashing his children, and he doesn't half thrash you when he starts. And yet you can't help liking him because . . . I don't quite know how to put it . . . it's because he can be so soft and kind too. He's ever so kind to animals, and to tiny children who don't know any better. But if he reckons you should know better, well he teaches you a lesson, and it hurts.'

I said :

'I couldn't bear it if he hit you, Johnny.'

After we left the shop, Johnny said we must get cracking and find out where this Mrs Sleeman-Evans lived. He said he wouldn't feel quite so bad if he found out where the baby was going to be. He wouldn't let his father know. And he would go down and see it, and buy it things, and take it out to feed the birds. He said it would give him something to save up for, something he could think about when he was lonely and fed up. He said sometimes he couldn't believe there was a baby. It was the sort of thing he would have wanted and he wouldn't have known it. And he said as for me saying it might be dead, he

didn't believe that for a minute, so I mustn't worry myself. Our baby wouldn't die.

I waited on the pavement while Johnny went to the houses and asked if Mrs Sleeman-Evans lived there. At some houses, he seemed to wait hours and nobody came. At others, the people weren't very pleased at being dragged down long flights of stairs. But none of them knew of Mrs Sleeman-Evans. When we had been to every house from which the river might look like a sea, Johnny said :

'That's that !'

He wasn't so happy now. We sat on a boat that was a kind of passage from the land to every other boat. We expected to be told to move on, but a man looked out and said nothing, so we stayed. It was cosier there than stuck up on the coping. It was nearer the water, part of the river life. You could feel the water slap at you. And there was something about it that made you forget time was passing by, or that there was such a thing as time.

Perhaps it only made me forget. Johnny suddenly looked at his watch and said :

'Here ! D'you see what the time is ? I'll have to go or I'll be late home. Dad'll know I'm not doing overtime. Besides, he's bound to be suspicious.' We both stood up, and we looked right down a stretch of almost white water that could have been mistaken for the sea.

I said I'd walk with Johnny as far as the bus. He looked as if he couldn't take any more. He let three buses go by when we got to the stop. At last he said :

'I can't leave you, and yet I can't stay . . . What will you do, Kathy ?'

I said : 'I don't know . . . I might go back to where we were sitting till I feel not so tired ; and then I might go to some more houses and try to find Mrs Sleeman-Evans.'

'But where will you sleep, Kathy ?'

'I don't know . . . But don't you worry. I'll be by the river. The river's kind of company, isn't it ?'

Another bus went by, and Johnny's face looked so awful I thought I ought to leave him to catch the next. So I said :

'Well . . . cheerio, Johnny.'

But he didn't catch the next bus. He said :

'I can't do it, Kathy! I can't leave you like this! I don't care what he does to me. I don't care if he kills me. I'd rather be dead than feel like I do about you. I've got to know you're safe somewhere. . . .'

'I will go somewhere safe, Johnny. I'll go to Larry Pearce. You get your bus.'

We saw another bus stopped at the traffic lights. Johnny said :

'Listen ! I'll go home. I'll see how things are. I might even tell my dad I'd rather be killed than stopped from seeing you . . . But I'll come back right here. And I'll leave a message for Larry Pearce to meet us here. He'll know what to do about you. It's silly, isn't it, but if Larry was here, I wouldn't be worrying at all.'

I watched Johnny jump on his bus. He stood on the platform, waving all the time until the bus turned the corner and he could see me no longer. And then I went back to the boat and sat where we had sat and watched the swell of the water, and saw how it grew whiter as it flowed out to the stretch where it was like a sea. Five swans came close, treading the water to keep them from hitting the boat, and they watched me closely as if expecting me to say something to them.



THE man who had looked out of the wheelhouse at Johnny and me and said nothing came by.

‘Surely he hasn’t given you the brush-off?’ he laughed.

‘He’s gone home to tea. He’s coming back.’

‘Has he, begorrah? Case of “I’m all right, Jack!” What about you? What about your tea?’

‘I don’t want any.’

‘Won’t your mother expect you home to tea?’

‘She goes to work.’

‘We shall have to see what we can do about it, shan’t we?’ he said. ‘Can’t go having you dying of starvation, can we? D’you know what we do with corpses? Throw ’em to the swans. That’s what they’re waiting for.’

I laughed because I knew he wanted me to, and we both stared out to Mrs Sleeman-Evans’s white sea.

‘Tell you what,’ the man said. ‘You pop over the road and get me some cigarettes, and when you come back I’ll have a mug of tea ready for you. And I might even find you a ship’s biscuit as well. Blonde straight hair is my favourite.’

I drank all the tea, but the swans ate most of the biscuits. The man sat by me with a mug of tea and smoked, and then

when we had finished he said he had better be getting home or his missis would think he had run off with the girl next door. He said it was O.K. by him if I waited where I was, and if anyone tried to stop me I was to say Mr Clarke had given me permission. He said he owned the moorings there and if he couldn't give me permission to stay put, he'd like to know who could.

At first I was very happy sitting there. I wasn't alone. People passed on their way to and from the other boats, said things to me like 'Heil!' and 'He woŕ't be long now!' And there were the birds that suddenly left the moorings, the swans to fly in a lovely line towards Battersea Park and the ducks to mid-stream and then out of sight. And then there was the water flowing white into a kind of sea, and then becoming tinged with pink, and then going back to white—but a different white, a sad, moving, flat light.

I grew sad with the water, and then I began wanting Johnny and feeling as if I had wanted him like this all my life. I didn't feel quiet any more. I kept getting up to see if Johnny was coming, and several times I thought I could see him on the bridge and I hurried there and he was gone. I worried about what I was going to do if Johnny didn't come, and then one worry led to another; and soon I was remembering the screen they had put round Mrs Spooner to tell her her baby was dead, and the feeling I had—feeling tight waiting for some sound; and the way all that day I had waited, only I hadn't known it, for them to come and put a screen round my bed.

I felt tears running down my cheeks. I wanted someone to do something. I wanted to be back in hospital. I wanted to say I was sorry to Mrs Connolly. I was sorry. I was sorry for everything, sorry I wasn't like Tina so that Mum loved me. Johnny loved me, but I would never see him again. I thought, anything's better than being alone here, nobody caring. Getting caught by the police was better. . . .

I stood up, thinking a policeman might see me and ask me what I thought I was doing in Tina's clothes. It was then that

I saw Johnny and two men on the other side of the street. I was frightened for just one moment, and then I was glad. One of them was sure to be Johnny's father. He had come to belt me for saying the baby's father was Johnny. Good! Let him! Anything was better than nobody caring.

I waited for them to come across. One man came alone. I thought, that's Johnny's father. It looked as if Johnny was trying to come, too, but the other man held him.

The man came to the embankment wall and called to me:

'I say! Miss! Can I have a word with you? Up here, if you don't mind. It's less public, sort of. . . .'

I went across the landing that connected with the steps. I stood a yard or two away from the man. He stared at me, open-mouthed, as if he had expected to see an elephant and I had come in its place.

'You're not the one my Johnny has been going with?' he asked. I didn't answer. 'Is your name "Kathy"?'

He was tall, much taller than Johnny, and big with it. I thought, no wonder Johnny is frightened of him. I'm frightened of him. I don't want him to hit me. If he comes near, I'll throw myself in the water.

'Well? Is your name Kathy or isn't it? Mind you, if you say it's Kathy I won't believe it. I can't believe you're the girl that. . . .' He turned away, and shouted across to Johnny: 'Hi! Come over here for a minute, will you?'

Johnny came over with the other man. Johnny's dad said:

'Johnny . . . Come here a minute . . . That's not the girl you've been going about with . . . ?' Johnny didn't answer, and his father grabbed the lapels of his coat into one great hand and shook him. 'Well . . . ?'

'Careful, Henry,' the other man said. 'You don't want to lose your temper. You know what you are. . . .'

Johnny's father still shook Johnny: 'Answer me!'

'That's Kathy. . . .'

'You mean that's the kid that was in trouble. . . .?'

'Yes, Dad.'

Johnny's dad appealed to the other man :

'George! Am I seeing things? That kid there's a bloody school-kid!' He stood in front of Johnny, his stomach going in and out. 'You didn't tell me she was a school-kid! D'you know you could get ten years for this. Christ, if I don't kill you!'

George got between them.

'Now look here, Henry, what's the use of letting your temper get out of control? I know just how you're feeling, finding it's a schoolgirl he's got in this mess. I'd like to knock him in the drink myself. But we've got to think of Nell, haven't we. If we get ourselves run in, she'll know why won't she? And one thing I'm certain of, she must never know, especially now.'

'But I came here to fix things with a girl over age—one of those tarts that get up at the Four Square Caff.'

They talked on, arguing, pleading with each other. I could see Johnny's father wanted to hit him, and George wouldn't have minded either only he kept on remembering 'Nell'. Nell would drop dead from the shock. Nell would break her heart. Johnny was Nell's boy. Nell had never been able to listen to a word against Johnny. Johnny and I just stared at the water. I felt better now he was here, even though he seemed so much younger and smaller in his fear of his dad.

It seemed to be agreed that George should talk to me because he was Nell's brother. George came close to me and said :

'Let you and me have a talk, eh?'

He took my arm and made me go towards the bridge, and when we were far enough away from the others, he took out some cigarettes and offered me one.

'Smoke?'

'No thank you.'

'Mind if I do?'

He lit his cigarette.

'I'm sorry about all this, you know. And I want you to believe that I've got nothing against you. You've made a mistake, a big

mistake, but that's life, and I suppose you've paid for it. The woman always pays, eh?'

He leaned on the parapet, talking, smoking with narrowed eyes. I looked at Johnny and his father. I couldn't see their faces. They were silhouetted against the white sea.

'You don't want to get young Johnny into trouble, do you? I'm sure you don't. I can see you're not that sort of a girl. I don't mind telling you we came down expecting to find someone quite different, someone we could buy off. I mean, let's face it, that's the usual line with women of that kind, isn't it? Now I don't know what to say . . . What about your mum and dad? What about the baby? What about your school? Hasn't anyone tried to find out who the father is? I mean, in cases like this someone usually goes inside, don't they?'

It didn't seem very real, all this. There was something unreal now about the river and the opposite bank. It was getting hazy, not a white haze that you could see but a kind of disappearing greyness. True, the river looked like Mrs Sleeman-Evans's white sea. It flowed so broad, so light compared with the disappearing banks that it *felt* like the sea. I thought, Mrs Sleeman-Evans is looking out on it now, being glad that she lives where she does, knowing she couldn't live anywhere else. And my baby's up there in Susan's room, and she's glad I had it because she likes babies. . . .

Uncle George was saying :

'I don't want to be nasty. As I said, we all make mistakes, and we all pay for them one way or another . . . And for my part, young Johnny could pay the full bill and serve him right. It would keep him out of circulation for a bit until he has learned that mucking about with school-kids is a dirty game. Yes, I'd let him pay the full price, especially now I've seen you, Kid. I've got daughters of my own—one a bit older than you and one a bit younger—and God help anyone that interfered with them! Yes, Johnny would pay for my part, only it's his mother I'm thinking of . . . dotes on Johnny . . . Johnny's her boy. She'd sacrifice the lot of us if it would help Johnny,

always has. That's why Henry has had to be so fierce with him. I mean, my sister would have given that boy of hers the top brick off the chimney if he'd asked for it . . . I mean, look at the way she lets him get things on the never-never! Henry doesn't believe in it. He's like me—pay as you go and if you drop dead before pay day you got no regrets . . . But Johnny must have everything he wants. If he wants a motor bike, Johnny must have it. So she nags herself narrow, gets ill—you know all the tricks women have to get their own way—and Henry signs the Hire Purchase to get some peace. Nell's my sister, and I think the world of her, but she ought never to have had a son . . . ruined him, that's what she has done. See, he has got used to the idea that what he wants he must have, even when it comes to a bit of how-do-you-do with a woman, or a kid, I should say.'

His cigarettes were giving out. He looked disappointedly at the box, smiled at me, shook his head.

'Isn't it a game, eh? I'm smoking too much, that's my trouble. I'll have to cut it down, or I'll wake up one morning and find I've died of cancer, won't I? I'm glad you don't smoke, Kid. If I saw a cigarette in my girls' mouths, I'd knock it down their throats. I would straight. There's no future in it.' He stared towards the white sea that was getting more and more silvery as the shadows deepened. 'Pretty, ain't it? Makes you wonder where you'd get if you sailed towards the light, don't it?' He was quiet for a long time. 'Yes . . . d'you know, Kid, seeing you was a shock, but it makes me feel better, if you get me.'

Johnny and his father came towards us.

'Got any cigarettes, George?'

'Here you are . . . the last one . . . We must go and wet our whistles and fill up, mustn't we?'

They lit Johnny's father's cigarette. Johnny looked away from me, his face so terribly agonized I thought he wouldn't mind if someone tied a brick round his neck and threw him in the water.

George said :

'Where do we go from here, Henry? I mean, if she'd been the dirty little tart we've been talking about all day it would have been dead easy. She's quite taken the wind out of my sails, and that doesn't often happen to me, as you well know. I mean, if she was a little tart, I could speak the language, but. . . .'

They both stared at Johnny in hatred and disgust.

'I wonder he's got the nerve to stand there.'

'D'you know what I'd do if I was him? I'd put me head down the pan and pull the chain.'

They withdrew a little way and leaned on the parapet and smoked and talked with lips and hands.

I said to Johnny : 'Johnny . . . don't . . . don't look like that. It doesn't matter what they say, we know it wasn't your fault, and I'll always swear it wasn't you, I will truly . . . I'm fond of you Johnny . . . I've just realized it. Perhaps I always was . . . because Larry Pearce wanted to buy me things and go steady with me and I wouldn't, would I . . . ? I always got on your bike, didn't I? They can't kill you, Johnny . . . They can keep you away from me for a bit perhaps . . . but you'll get older and so shall I; and one night you'll come up to the Caff, and I'll be sitting there, and you'll say "Coming for a run?" and all this will seem as if it never happened. . . .'

He looked wild.

'I feel like finishing it all . . . jumping in the river and drowning myself and laughing at them with my last breath and saying "See!" I can't stand any more of it. They never stopped talking, threatening, calling you a dirty little tart, and . . . They said they were coming down and settling you once and for all. I tried to stop them, but what could I do against the two of them? They were waiting for me in the street. They knew I hadn't been to work, and they guessed I was with you, and they said all I had come to see you for was to have another cut off the joint . . . They pretty-well frog-marched me to the park and questioned me. If I didn't answer, I got a punch where it wouldn't show, or my arm pretty-well broken, you know the

sort of thing . . . I'm sorry, Kathy. . . I feel so awful, I don't know which way to turn . . . It's funny . . . in this last week I've been madly happy, visiting you, seeing our baby . . . and now. . . .'

'Johnny . . . Johnny . . . I love you . . . I do. I've never said it before to anyone . . . Johnny . . . We'll go steady . . . We'll find a way. They can't kill you. They can't kill me. They can't kill the baby . . . I'll keep the baby. I'll keep it for you, Johnny . . . They can't hurt me, Johnny, so what are you worrying about?'

'They said they were going to. They said they'd wring your neck and swing for it. They would have done if you'd been older and more like Susan and Merle . . . but you look so young in those clothes. It gave *me* a bit of a shock when I saw you this morning . . . You looked a bit ill, too, and that sort of hurt. . . .' Tears were streaming down his face. 'Kathy! What can I do? I can't face leaving you here all night. But they'll make me. They said I wasn't to give you any help at all because helping you was agreeing I was the baby's father. . . .'

The two men came back :

'You can cry!'

'*And* you can forget the dates you've been making!' Uncle George said. 'You won't be making any more dates for the next two or three years until you know what what is. You'll be spending your evenings along of your dad or me so you won't get a chance to scatter any more bastards about the place. . . .'

'And you can wipe that look off your face, my son!' Johnny's dad said, getting so near Johnny that he trod on his toe. 'You're lucky, dead lucky. Anyone else would have been doing time now. Christ knows why the kid hasn't given you away. Perhaps she's keen on you, poor fool!'

Uncle George took my arm.

'Listen, Kid . . . You've got nothing to worry about, nothing at all. If you're short of a pound, you've only got to come and see me at the works—Mr George Dyer—and the money is yours. But don't misunderstand me, that means it's yours so



long as you keep your mouth shut as you have been doing and you don't communicate with Johnny in any way. I understand the kid's being adopted , . . Well, couldn't be better, could it? No worry there. And as far as I can see we can draw a line under the chapter and turn over the page and begin a new one, and call that Chapter One, if you get me. I can't say fairer than that, can I? But mind, if you so much as look at Johnny after tonight. . . .'

He held out two pound notes, and smiled at me and said :

'Go on! Take them! And they won't be the last if you act sensible.'

Johnny suddenly grabbed the money, flung it into his Uncle's face, then, sobbing, ran along the embankment, down the two steps on to the platform on Mr Clarke's boat and into the river before we had hardly started to follow him.

I screamed : 'Johnny!' and I was first after him. I knew what he was going to do, and the others didn't. I didn't want Johnny to be drowned like the kitten I had dried so carefully and yet it hadn't come to life. . . .

I looked into the water, and he wasn't there, and then suddenly he was, and I knew I had got to get him. I dived in, sobbing, and I came up very close to Johnny. I tried to grab him, and I missed, and then I got close to him again and he struggled because he wished then he hadn't jumped in because he couldn't swim. I clutched him, and all the lessons I had learned about life-saving went out of my head, and all I knew was that I mustn't let go of Johnny. I didn't know how to swim, either, until I realized I was going to die and I didn't want to.

THEY must have fished me out. I remember a boat coming close, and a man dragging my hair until I screamed 'Let go!' and going under again.

I was lying in the boat, and they said I was a plucky kid. And then I was lying on the ground and they said I had had it. A stone I was lying on cut my face and dirt was in my mouth.

I was in bed in a hospital. It wasn't my hospital. I was by myself in a pretty room with a low window, and as I lay I could see a line of barges slipping by. There were a lot of them. I counted up to twelve, and then I seemed to get up to fifty, and I wondered how you could have fifty barges in one line.

I saw a line of swans flying by. I counted them. It might have been the swans that went up to fifty.

My mother was sitting crying. I thought something must be wrong with Tina. Dad was there, staring, and Teddy Dillon was patting my cheek, and soon everybody was there, with Mrs Connolly in the front, and I wanted to see the three blobs, but I couldn't open my eyes. And the room got so full, the walls burst, and the water came in, and I was struggling to get to Johnny.

Nurse was there, no nurse I had ever seen, and I thought

she must be a new nurse, or Sister was so angry with me she had had me taken to another hospital a long way away.

Nurse said :

‘Come on, Lovey ! Just a sip ! Swallow it ! There !’

I had my eyes open now, and the river was there, and the barges were passing, but all the people had gone out of the room. Nurse patted my cheek.

‘You’re a lovely girl,’ she said. ‘You’ve swallowed two whole spoonsful ! What do you think of that ? You’ll get so fat if you go on like that, we’ll have to put you on a slimming diet, shan’t we ?’

‘Am I ill ?’ I said.

‘Not now. You’re better, Lovey . . . Shall I tell you a secret ? I didn’t like coming in today in case you weren’t better. Silly, isn’t it ? And I ought to know better, didn’t I ?’

‘Am I better ?’ I asked. It seemed a long time later. It was a different nurse, and she said :

‘Of course you’re better, Kathleen Mavourneen ! I bet if I let you, you’d push the house over ! The doctor is very pleased with you.’

I was glad the doctor was pleased with me. I thought, he’ll wink at me when Sister isn’t looking. . . .

And then Mum was back again, and she was still crying and the nurse said she could help me best by pulling herself together. She sobbed all the more, and nurse sent her out, and it was Dad who sat by me, not doing anything but holding my hand and saying :

‘Kathy ! Oh, Kathy !’

I said I was all right now, and the doctor was pleased with me, and we watched the barges going by, and I asked him to count them because I was so tired. He said there were seven, his lucky number. He said I had got nothing to worry about after this, nothing. He said he had learned a bitter lesson and that after this he would do what he knew was right. He said his home was my home and always would be, and his home was my baby’s home and always would be, and he would be no

father of mine if he let things go on as he had. He said he took all the blame on himself, every bit of it. It wasn't Mum's fault if he had let her treat him like a doormat, was it? A man ought to ride a woman, not a woman ride a man. It stood to reason, didn't it?

Nurse came in then and said she hoped he was remembering not to talk too much. I said I liked hearing people talk, and he had counted seven barges and that was his lucky number.

We sat hand in hand while the room grew dark and the water grew light.

Dad said :

'Teddy Dillon has been one of the best through all this, Kathleen. I don't know where we'd have been without him. Those are his flowers there . . . the anemones, see them? And you've had fresh flowers every day from him. He's been a brick, running us here, there and everywhere in his car, and answering letters and callers and you know all the business attached to a thing like this, don't you? He's downstairs now, waiting to take me back. Queer how he turned up in our lives, wasn't it? I tell you, you never know.'

They let Teddy Dillon come and see me the next day. He brought me some red roses for the nurse and some black grapes for me. He kissed me when he came in, and pinched my cheek, and said I was a proper fraud frightening the life out of him like I had. He said the world couldn't afford to lose any of its blondes, else what would the gentlemen do?

He said when I left hospital I was going away for a nice long holiday, and he was going to run me down, and he would bring Dad down at the week-end and the three of us would paint the town red. He said all this had brought him and Dad very close with the kind of closeness you only ever got when you were up against it as a prisoner of war, or something like that. He said Dad was a good scout, but then so was I, or should he call me a good girl guide, and was I always prepared? He said they ought to give me a medal, and he'd like to be there to see me get it.

After that, I was like a queen in that room. I had everybody come to see me, at least almost everybody. Dad came, of course, and Teddy Dillon, and the nurses said I would have to rent a warehouse if they brought me any more things. Mum came. She always came in crying, and the nurse told her off and sometimes sent her out till she pulled herself together. She spent most of the time repeating that she wouldn't have had this happen for worlds, that she could see something like this coming from the very first night I didn't come home, that she didn't understand me, never had and never would, that it had been touch and go with me, and I might have been dead and buried at this very moment. Admitted, I'd got pluck, but I could mark her words, that before all this was finished with everything would come out. She had done her best to shield me. She had lied until she didn't know when she was telling the truth and when she was lying. It was all very well for my father to say: 'Forget it!' and 'You can't say she hasn't got guts!' She would forget it if the neighbours would let her, but not them. Laughing up their sleeves, that's what they were doing, because they knew I had had a baby and as we hadn't taken anyone to court they would swear I didn't even know the father. . . .

Mrs Sleeman-Evans came. She brought me books and papers that I never read, and she talked about the river and the white sea. She said I couldn't have been in a more lovely room if I had had it built specially. She said the view was almost as good as from her own flat, but not quite. No place in London was quite as good as her flat. It was the angle of that side window of hers. It gave the perfect view. She never mentioned the baby. I used to think she would talk about it one day, and when she got up to go, I would ask her to be sure to come the next day, not because I wanted to see her, but because I thought tomorrow she would say something about the baby. She never did. I lay thinking I would ask. But I never did. I thought, if I ask she'll look uncomfortable because it's dead.

Nurse Brown came to see me, and she brought me everyone's love as well as a powder compact with butterflies' wings

enamelled on the lid in pink and blue. She said she would like to smack my bottom, but my new Sister had said she mustn't do anything to tire me, and a smacked bottom would certainly do that even if it tired her more. She said my doctor sent his love, he really did, he was quite smitten on me. She said I might not think it, but life could be very good. The happiest lives were often the saddest too. Things worked that way, and I was due for a lot of happiness, and I mustn't let anything that had happened get me down. She said I was a pretty kid, and I was going to be prettier still. She didn't mention the baby, either, so I knew it was dead. She did say one thing. She said she had handed the things I had left at the hospital to my new hospital Sister, and she had said it might be as well to forget them, but she herself wasn't so sure, but then who was she when it came to it?

Miss Achesson came at odd moments and stayed barely long enough to ask how I was, if there was anything I wanted, if anything was worrying me, if there was any question I wanted to ask. There were questions I wanted to ask, questions I might have asked if she had given me more time. But I was afraid she would hurry away in the middle of a question with her usual goodbye: 'Marvellous view, this Kathleen! You're very lucky! Don't worry, will you?'

Sister found me crying once after Miss Achesson had gone. She said it was really too bad of Miss Achesson to upset me like this, and I need not see her if I would rather not.

'Poor little sweet! You have far too many visitors! I'll stop every one of them!'

I was frightened she meant it.

'Not everybody! If Mr Park comes, you'll let him see me?'

Sister stopped puffing up my pillows and stared at me.

'Mr Park? That's the father of . . . of the boy?'

I turned my face to the wall then. I knew something I had known from the very first. I knew why nobody talked about Johnny, why they all came to see me and brought me all those things . . . Like the baby, Johnny was dead.

Sister said :

‘I’ll get in touch with Mr Park, shall I?’

I sat up :

‘No! I don’t want to see him! I won’t see him!’

Sister stroked my hair.

‘You won’t see anyone you don’t want to, Chicken!’

JOHNNY'S Uncle George came to see me, not Mr Park. Perhaps Sister told Mr Park I wouldn't see him, so Uncle George came. He brought me some flowers, and looked miserable when he saw the room was pretty full of them. He stood holding them like a fool.

'I just thought,' he said. 'I just thought.'

Sister took the bunch from him.

'Aren't they lovely, Kathleen? The money that's been spent on flowers for you would keep me in my old age. Well, Mr Dyer, I'll leave you, but don't worry the patient. We've worked hard to get her better, and we don't want her going back.' She pretended to slap my cheek. 'Besides, the sooner she's right better, the sooner we get rid of her.'

Uncle George didn't say a word for long after the door was closed. Like me, he watched the barges going by, and after they had gone he watched the swelling water. He breathed heavily, kept shifting his stomach as if it was too full. It did seem to drop between his wide apart legs.

'So you're getting better, Kathy? Well, that's fine, isn't it? Fine! I must say you look it. You look clean and pink and . . .



well, quite pretty. I've got girls of my own, so there's no harm in telling you that, is there?"

He lifted his stomach, and watched the river. A steamer was passing, and a loud speaker was shouting something. The steamer looked full to bursting.

'That's one thing I've always meant to do,' Uncle George said. 'But you know how it is, don't you? There has always been something else to think of . . . I remember that first summer of the war . . . of course you weren't born nor thought of then . . . I was only a kid myself come to that . . . I said to Jenny—that's my wife, but we were only larking about then—I said: "What d'you say to a trip down the river, Jenny?" And then damn me if the war didn't start, and muggins was in the front of the queue. And all the war I used to write to Jenny: "When I get back we'll take that trip down the river. . . ." And damn me when I got back if our first baby wasn't coming along, and. . . .'

A whole line of barges came by now, fat low black barges that came from nowhere and went to nowhere.

'Something restful about barges,' Uncle George said. He fidgetted in his pockets. 'D'you think I dare light up? I mean, will that sister boot me out if she catches me? Not that I wouldn't be glad if she did, Kathleen. What I've got to say isn't easy, but I thought it would come easier from me than from Johnny's Dad, if you get me.'

There were no barges now to look at. I wished there had been because I didn't want him to tell me Johnny was dead. Johnny didn't want to die. I knew he didn't when I saw him struggling in the water. I felt ill, remembering my feet touching mud, my hands clutching Johnny. . . .

The cigarette took a lot of rolling and licking and lighting. But at last Uncle George was puffing out blue-grey smoke, and I counted the leaves on a daisy.

'I promised Sister I wouldn't talk to you about Johnny, and I won't. I want to forget, too. But there are some things that have to be said, aren't there? I expect you knew they adjourned

the inquest until you were well enough to attend? For my part, they could adjourn it for ever, but you know what the law is, must say every word on every subject. . . .'

There was nothing on the river to take my mind off his words, or even to give him a let up. I didn't look at him, but I could feel he was struggling. I knew his neck was red and his face pale, and his stomach dropped over the front of the chair.

'What I've got to say to you isn't right if you look at it one way, but it's dead right if you look at it another way . . . And isn't that what right is? My right is your wrong, the heads and tails of a coin . . . You knew the heads of Johnny on your coin, and we knew the tails of him . . . But on *our* coin what we knew was the heads if you follow me?'

I didn't follow him, and I was glad. I heard his words and they didn't mean anything. There must have been thousands of meaningless words he said as I watched the river, or counted the petals on the flowers, or the number of flowers in a vase. It was only when he put out his cigarette, threw ash and stub out of the window, dusted the table with his handkerchief and then waved himself and the handkerchief about to 'clear the air' that I gave heed to him. He must be going, and I didn't want him to go. I wanted him to stay and talk all round the moon. I wanted to ask him questions. I wanted to say: 'Is Johnny dead?' and if he said 'Yes', I'd say 'Liar! Liar! Liar! I saved him, so he can't be dead! I had hold of him when we came up, and if you could fish me out, why couldn't you fish him out? You didn't try. You didn't want him to stay alive because of what he'd done to me so I had a baby!'

He stood up.

'Don't go!'

'I've got to, Kathy! I've got to get back to Johnny's dad. I'm more worried about him now than I am about my sister Nell, that's Johnny's mother. I mean, let's face it, for her it's a straight-forward accident when all is said and done, but for Henry it's this silly nonsense in his head that he killed Johnny. I mean, you know and I know he didn't kill Johnny. But it's

what you believe that counts, isn't it, and he believes he killed Johnny. And I say to him: "Stuff and nonsense!" And I'm afraid I also say "Balls!" because that's just what it is . . . I say to him, if the girl had got drowned, then you'd say you killed her too? He says that's different, but I can't see it, and I don't suppose you can either, can you?"

'Can I what?'

'See it?'

I had my face to the wall now. I saw the wall, a yellowish paint without a mark to catch the eye. It went on for ever, the same surface, no mark, nothing to count. . . .

'You see, Kathy, my point is, nothing we can do will bring Johnny back . . . And all the ferretting and finding out and probing and inquests isn't going to do anyone a scrap of good. It's not going to ease the ache in anyone's heart, it's not going to help anyone to bear what they've got to bear. And yet we've got to go through with it when you're better. . . .' He was quiet, and I thought that was the end, but he began again: 'O.K.! We've got to go through with the inquest. Well, we can either make it short and I won't say sweet but soon over and soon forgotten; or we can make it a red-letter day for the papers, with talk of you and the baby and Johnny, and then I shan't only have his dad up the wall but I'll have his mum too, because of course she doesn't know a thing about that side of it. She's been a brick. She's got her beliefs, too. She said if the truth was known, you fell in and Johnny, being Johnny, went to save you . . . Can you beat it? But I like her story best.'

Nurse came in to warn Uncle George that the doctor would be along in ten minutes, so he'd better say his goodbyes. She sniffed the air and said she was sure he hadn't been smoking though she wondered if Sister would be as sure. Uncle George looked at her, not saying he hadn't smoked and not saying he had.

'Say your goodbyes, and I'll be along to give you the once-over, Kathleen.'

Uncle George stood in the centre of the room, facing the

blank wall. He breathed heavily in and heavily out, heavily in and heavily out until I wanted to shout : 'Stop breathing !'

'You get me, don't you, Kathy? Least said, soonest mended. If you could swear you didn't know Johnny, had never seen him till you noticed he had fallen in the water, and then you tried to save him . . . See, they'd still know you were brave . . . But if Nell ever got wind of you and the baby and me and Johnny's father, well, she's no fool . . . She'd know why he jumped in and she'd be right up the wall. . . .'

I looked at Uncle George properly for the first time. And he was ugly, fat and red, and his eyes were piggy. The sight of him made me mad. I suddenly knew he was lying. Johnny wasn't dead ! He was alive. They were saying all this so I never saw Johnny again. That was what they had wanted at the beginning. That was what they had made Johnny promise. And now they had concocted all those lies to make me go away and never see Johnny again !

I said :

'Liar ! Johnny's not dead ! You wouldn't have fished me out and left him in. You'd have been glad if I'd been dead ! So would I !'

I suddenly saw his face again, and I didn't want to upset him any more, so I lay down and hid my face and sobbed. I didn't know if he was still there until Sister and Nurse came in and said he must go and wait outside. Sister said I wasn't hurt and I must pull myself together, she'd get me a nice drink, eh ?

Nurse stayed with me, smoothing my hair.

'Poor chicken !' she said. 'What's the trouble? He's a bad man to worry you like this.'

I said :

'He didn't do anything . . . only told lies . . . He tried to say Johnny was . . . was like my baby. . . .'

Nurse laughed.

'I don't know who the baby's like, but she's a lovely girl. . . .'

I pushed her away :

'You're lying now. You're pretending she's not dead. . . .'

'Dead? Your baby? What makes you think she's dead? Mrs Sleeman-Evans is looking after her. She lives just a block or two away . . . She brought the baby here only yesterday in case Sister thought you should see her. Would you like to see her?'

She looked as if she was telling the truth. But of course she was lying. I knew what they were at. They wanted to get me well, and then they'd tell me nicely they were sorry Johnny was dead and the baby was dead and everybody was dead except me.

I said :

'I only wanted the truth.'

'It is the truth, Chicken!' she said. 'Would I stand here and tell you your baby's a beauty if it was dead? Of course I wouldn't! I'd talk about other things—the flowers or the view. But your baby is alive. And Mrs Sleeman-Evans who is on our committee here, and we know her well . . she's got the baby. She's looking after it for you . . . And if Sister agrees, you can see it the minute the doctor has gone . . . There! But, if the doctor sees you in this state, he may say no visitors, not even the baby!'

She combed my hair and sponged my face and clamped me in my bed. And I counted seven barges going by while I waited for the doctor.

MISS ACHESSON came to fetch me from the hospital. She had her car outside, and she grumbled a bit about all the things I had collected. She said I really ought to be able to leave behind such things as books and magazines and potted plants, even if I took away the chocolates, though goodness gracious there was enough to stock a sweet shop! Books and plants and magazines one always left behind for other people . . . But if I insisted, they'd have to go in the boot, and if the tops got knocked off my plants I only had myself to blame.

A photographer came up and wanted to take a picture of me. Miss Achesson pushed me into the car and stood in the way. She told the photographer I was in the care of the Children's Officer, and I mustn't be photographed without permission, and she wouldn't give it even if she could. We had got more than enough publicity to go through at the inquest, and if the man had any spark of decency, he'd beat it.

Sister came rushing out of the hospital with two packages. One, I knew, was the white crash helmet, and the other the bag containing the yellow nylon undies that Mrs Midgeley's husband had bought.

'I nearly forgot these,' Sister said. 'Well, Trouble! I'll say "goodbye", but you'll come and see us, won't you. And keep smiling!'

We drove off along the embankment that Johnny and I had walked together. There were the trees of Battersea Park to bound the river and the bridges to cut it up, and the power station outline to make you sure you'd been there before. We swirled round Parliament Square and then round Trafalgar Square, and then lost all the recognizable buildings in narrow streets that only crossed main roads. Miss Achesson gave all her attention to her driving. I knew she expected me to sit quite still and be taken wherever she liked. I didn't much care, anyway. One place was as good as another. She had come to see me the night before to bring me my clothes, and she had said that the Children's Officer had agreed with her that it would be best if I stayed at the hostel until everything was settled and then we could think. She had laughed, as if she wasn't so pleased at her thoughts.

'We've had the usual crop of offers of homes for you. And when the inquest is fully reported, I don't doubt we shall have many more. But very few of the people who read a story in the papers and offer a home have thought about it fully, and those who have aren't always suitable. The Department always goes slow on these things, and you'd be surprised how very many of them sort themselves out that way.'

I hadn't known London was so big. We seemed to be driving for hours through streets I had never been in before. And then we came to a very wide road, with tall houses and pillared entrances. We stopped outside No. 90.

Miss Achesson switched off the engine, put the key into her pocket, took her gloves and a black notebook from the shelf.

'Must just enter the mileage,' she said. She did this, consulting the clock. 'Now,' she said, 'this is Amberley House—a hostel for working girls. It's the hostel I told you about. It could be a very good jumping-off ground for you. But we'll forget all that for the moment as so many other ideas have to be discussed.'

We'll say you're at Amberley House until after the inquest and all the business connected with it, shall we?"

She didn't expect me to answer.

'Now, Miss Phipps is in charge at Amberley. She knows her job. She wants to help girls, but she doesn't stand any nonsense. If she did, she wouldn't last long, would she?

'Now, is there anything you'd like to ask me, Kathleen, because I shall have to hurry away.'

'I don't want to go to the inquest,' I said.

'Nobody *wants* to go to an inquest, Kathleen. But these things have to be. All you've got to do is to tell the truth. You won't go wrong then.'

'If I tell the truth, Johnny's mother will be up the wall.'

'If I were Johnny's mother, I would have been up the wall long since, I'm afraid.'

'But it doesn't help anybody if I tell the truth. It doesn't make Johnny alive. Why drive his mother up the wall for nothing? If you make me go to the inquest, I shall say I don't know to everything.'

Miss Achesson sighed and began to pull on her gloves as if she wasn't talking any more.

'That's of course up to you, Kathleen. I can't do any more than go with you to the inquest, support you as far as I can.'

I felt angry with Miss Achesson, because I thought she could save me from all the talk and all the questioning if she wanted to.

'Johnny's dead,' I said, 'dead as mutton . . . ! O.K. He's dead, finished. O.K. let him stay dead ! Don't keep digging him up. It's years since he died. . . .'

'Now you're talking nonsense ! What is it . . . ? A fortnight . . . ? Three weeks . . . ? I must look it up. . . .'

'I don't have to look it up. I knew he was dead, the first minute, but you look in people's faces, and you hope . . . You've got to hope. . . .'

'Well that little episode is all over now, Kathleen, and you must wipe the slate clean and begin afresh. The main thing at



your stage is to stick to your job. That's everything, believe me. We find that the girls who stick to their job, whatever they feel like, rarely go wrong. They've only got to stay home once, and . . . well, we've pretty well had it as a department. . . .' She sounded very happy now. 'We'll find you a decent job, Kathleen, something with prospects. You're lucky. You've got more brains than most of the girls I have to deal with . . . We'll get you some attractive clothes and. . . .' She patted me. 'It's all over! Life's ahead of you, and it can be a very lovely thing if you keep going on the right lines.'

'The inquest isn't over.'

'No, But don't worry. I'll be there, and we'll do something afterwards to take your mind off it, shall we . . . ? Go to a show . . . ? Nice meal out . . . ?'

'You'll be there, but who'll have to answer all the questions? Questions, questions, questions and then more questions! How, when, where, why, who, which, what . . . ? They know all the answers, but you've got to say it like a bit of poetry because they like hearing it! They know what I did because that's how you get a baby. They know it was nine months ago because that's the time it takes. They know it was Johnny because he drowned himself rather than go on facing them, rather than go on not seeing me ever again, or the baby, rather than listen to what they were saying to me . . . They know it, but I've got to stand up and sing it like one of the Top Ten. . . .'

She let me cry for a long time. She offered me her handkerchief. I wanted it but I knocked it out of her hand. After a while, I couldn't cry any more. I tried by thinking of Johnny because while I was crying, nobody could ask me anything.

'Better?' Miss Achesson asked. I didn't answer. 'I'm sure you feel better after that. It's when you can't cry that the trouble starts. Here, use my handkerchief, or Miss Phipps will wonder what I'm bringing her, won't she? No? Shall we go in?'

I didn't move.

'I wish I had all the time in the world, Kathleen. But I've got to go and visit a foster-mother and put in a report, and the

poor clerk at the office will have to wait till I get back and . . . I know how you feel, but everything will be all right. All the sadness will pass, and you'll be gadding around. Nothing lasts for ever, whether it's something you want to last or something you don't . . . So keep your chin up, and I'll be along early so that we can have another little talk. What do you say to that? They'll ask questions. That's their job. And yours to tell the truth once and for all and then put it out of your mind.'

'They know the truth already.'

'They may guess but they don't know. I mean, I didn't know until now that it was really Johnny. . . .'

'It wasn't! I was lying! And tomorrow I shall swear it wasn't, that I'd never seen him till he fell in the water and I tried to save him.'

That annoyed her.

'That will only complicate things, Kathleen, because there will be other witnesses who will swear you knew Johnny. . . .'

'What witnesses?'

'Well . . . there's that woman in hospital . . . Mrs Connolly wasn't her name? She was in court at the opening of the enquiry when you were too ill to attend.'

I hit the car roof then. I swore. I screamed and hit out when Miss Achesson tried to stop me until she must have been black and blue all over. I got her so frightened she called to a woman passing by to ring at No. 90.

Miss Achesson had said that Miss Phipps didn't stand any nonsense. She didn't either. In seconds, she had me out of the car and up the steps on to the pillared front entrance and in the house. She didn't say a word. She just acted. She didn't really hurt me either, though I screamed that she was breaking my bones.

We were in a kind of sitting-room, myself in an armchair into which Miss Phipps had dumped me and Miss Phipps sitting bolt upright on a hard chair nearby. I heard Miss Achesson drive off.

'Now!' Miss Phipps said. 'Kathleen, isn't it? Why didn't you

walk in instead of having to be humped like a sack of flour? And I'm not so young as I used to be either, if I was ever young which I doubt at this moment. Ugh! Cup of tea is prescribed, I think . . . For someone who has just come out of hospital you're as strong as a lion!' She laughed. 'Don't tell old Achesson, but I was killing myself with laughter all the time. I mean, in your place I'd have kicked and sworn and fought . . . I wouldn't let people push me around, I can tell you . . . Anything to say?' She waited, and then laughed. 'I sound like a blasted judge, don't I, but in this work you get like it. You begin as a human being. You think you're going to make a home for the kind of girls nobody else can live with . . . It's a challenge! Gird up your loins—and my! What loins I've got to gird!'

She picked up a packet of cigarettes and offered me one.

'I don't smoke!'

'Good girl! Still one foot on the primrose path, eh? I won't ask if you mind if I do, because, like you, I do what I want, when I want . . . mostly. There are times when I do what I don't want, like dragging you in here. . . .'

She smoked on, breathing the smoke in heavily, and letting it just seep out of her mouth and nose as if she wanted to keep it.

'You see, Kathleen, I don't know much about you. They told me the gory details over the phone, but I know that gory details—the truest of them—are the biggest of liars. So I always forget the details. I don't care if you've had quins. I don't care if the father's a hottentot or the Duke of Wotsit. I don't care if you've robbed a bank and coshed a messenger. I don't care, and what's more, I forget it, and I'm as like as not to accuse you of being found in bed with the coalman when that was the girl in the next bed . . . We start from scratch. You've got to stay here till Lady Achesson gives you a clearance. But I'll make it as little like a detention centre as I can. You can come and go as you please up to . . . what age are you? Fifteen? Up to say eleven o'clock. I'll feed you as well as you'll let me,

and if you miss a meal I'll keep it hot but don't blame me if the meat's leather. I've got an excellent cleaner, so you won't be asked to do any chores except making your own bed and doing your own washing—and even that I'll do for a few days till you're fit again . . . So think twice before you run off, won't you? You might *not* find a better 'ole.'

A woman Miss Phipps introduced as 'Collins—my right hand' came in then with a tray of tea. I said I didn't want any, but Miss Phipps said :

'I don't want any, either, not in this room and with you. I always feel I'm at the Last Supper when I've "fixed" a new girl and tea is brought in. So don't kid yourself I'm enjoying it.'

Collins brought me a cup of tea slopped on to two biscuits. I took it and drank the tea while those two talked as if I wasn't there about a sheet that hadn't come back from the laundry and a shortage of greens.

'We'll put Kathleen up with Bardot and Sybil, shall we? They've both still got the Primrose Path in view, I think. . . .'

Miss Achesson had dumped my things in the hall—my books, my plants, my white crash helmet and my nylon undies. Miss Phipps and Collins collected them.

'Funny sort of trousseau you've got, Kathleen !' Miss Phipps said. 'Still, it takes all sorts to make a world. It's O.K. by me if you go out dressed in an azalea, and these days I don't reckon the police would notice it.' She peeped in at my white crash helmet.

'Don't touch that !' I shouted.

'I won't! I'm just born nose-y. It looked a funny-shaped parcel, that's all.'

There were three beds in the room, one dressing-table covered with jars and bottles and boxes of make-up, a wardrobe, three bedside lockers. Miss Collins dumped my things—the plants on the window ledge and the books on my bed.

'This is it, Kathleen !' Miss Phipps said. 'The room looks a bit dead at the moment, but that's because we've tidied it ready for you. But once Bardot and Sybil get home, it will feel in-

habited all right . . . If you feel like getting into bed, do, and I'll bring you up something nice. If you feel like coming down into the kitchen, well you can, and no questions asked. I'd like you to stay with us for a bit. I'll do what I can. I'll let you in at any hour, even if I curse you for making me lose my beauty sleep. But don't ever stay out because it's too late to come back. Remember, it's never too late to come back.'

She left me to the three beds and the dressing table and the wardrobe and the three bedside lockers.

MISS PHIPPS came up twice and asked me to come down and join the happy throng. I wouldn't. She said she would come again, she was a devil for punishment. She said I had got to go through these first hours, and she knew I felt like the spacemen were going to feel when the silly swines landed on the moon. But what could she do, only pop up occasionally to let me know the planet was inhabited, even if by monsters like her and Collins? I'd feel better when the girls came home. They spoke my language. Most of them had been through it, perhaps not the same but not unlike . . . and they were still alive to tell the tale. She said Lady Achesson had whispered something about an inquest. Horrible things in her opinion, and no child should be made to attend one. And for her part, if I didn't want to attend tomorrow, well she'd pop me in bed and swear I was sinking fast and they'd have to adjourn things and give everybody a chance of getting more used to the idea. And I needn't be frightened of Lady Achesson, neither. Welfare officers thought they were Lord God Almighty, but if she didn't want one upstairs in her house she wouldn't have it, and be damned. She had the laugh of them. It was easier to get welfare officers than hostel wardens, and they knew it.

Bardot was the first home. I heard the front door go and someone take the stairs two at a time and then a girl very like Brigitte Bardot burst in.

'Oh hell!' she said. 'I'd forgotten you! That's my bed you're sitting on, by the way. I don't mind, so long as you don't take root.'

I moved to my own bed. Bardot slung her bag and shortie coat down, began tearing off her jumper and skirt.

'I've got a date!' she said. 'Just met him! He's waiting on the corner. He's such a find that I didn't want to let him out of my sight, but then I wanted to put the glamour on so I said I must have ten minutes!' She opened one of the drawers. 'Oh hell! Damn shoulder strap's broken! And I must wear a slip with my jersey dress . . . Perhaps Sybil has got one I can pinch. . . .' She scabbled in another drawer, picked up a white slip and held it against herself. 'Not very glam, is it?' She stared at me. 'I say! You don't happen to have a decent slip, do you? If you had, I'd be thrilled to bits.'

I handed her the bag with the lemon set in. She tore the bag in her excitement, and in seconds she was prancing about the room, tossing the lemon slip to show the lemon knickers, hugging me and saying I was her best friend from then on and she'd do anything, absolutely anything for me in return. She seemed loth to put her dress on.

She sat at the dressing table and dabbed her face with cleansing lotion and then in seconds made it up.

'D'you think he'll recognize me?' she asked, posturing before me. She stopped posturing suddenly and said: 'You look as if you're waiting for the hearse to come. What are you in for? But don't answer. I haven't got time to listen. Tell Sybil I've got a date, a new one, the best ever, and I won't do anything she hasn't done.' She was at the door. 'You're going out, aren't you?'

I shook my head.

'Take my advice and go out somewhere, anywhere. You'll go nuts if you don't. Everybody goes out. If they haven't got a

date, they go on the prowl, or as a last resort they hold their own hands in the pictures.' She held out a handful of silver. 'Perhaps you're short of money? You're welcome to borrow some, honest . . . I've just had a rebate of income tax . . . ME!'

'It's not money,' I said. 'I've been ill. . . .'

'You'll have a relapse if you stay in here all evening moping . . . especially your first evening. Phipps & Co. are fine as that type go. They never let you down, never blab to welfare officers and even send the cops running with a flea in their ears. But that's not *living*, is it? Dry rot sets in if you're about here too long. Sundays is about the only time I can bear the place, when everybody's home, and there's a hell of a row with record players playing different things in different rooms, and people battering the bathroom door down, and others fighting over the iron . . . It's all right then.' She gasped. 'I've been in here half an hour! I said ten minutes! Oh God, don't let him go! I'll throw myself over the bridge if I've lost him! Oh God!'

She was down the stairs and out of the front door in seconds. I felt lonely when she had gone, and the room looked as if a light had been turned out. And the noises that began to be heard intensified my loneliness. Footsteps, girls shouting, a record playing a tune I knew, doors slamming. I sat on my bed, knowing suddenly that I couldn't bear it for long.

Miss Phipps came up and said supper was ready and I had better get down or those gutses would have scoffed the lot.

'Where's Bardot? I heard her come in, I'm sure.'

'She went out.'

Miss Phipps picked up Bardot's skirt from the floor and hung it on a hanger and folded her jumper and knickers and put them on her bed.

'That girl will get galloping consumption one of these days! Why the hell doesn't she have her supper before she goes out? She can tack the time on to the other end of the night, can't she? Come on, Kathleen! You'll have plenty of sitting in a room by yourself when you're old and no one wants you.'

Miss Phipps made me sit by her in the dining-room.



'This is Kathleen,' she said, 'rooming with Bardot and Wotsit. And if anyone wants to know what she's in for, it's murder.'

There were only about nine girls in the room, but the noise was deafening. Perhaps I wasn't used to it after being so long in hospital. Miss Phipps said I'd soon be making more noise than the lot of them put together, and for her part that time couldn't come too quickly. In lulls in the noise, I could hear isolated sentences, sentences about a film, a pick-up, a pop singer, a fine imposed at work.

Then Sybil came in.

'Sybil . . . Come here and meet your new room-mate Kathleen, in for murder . . . Any questions?'

'Are you animal, vegetable or mineral?' Sybil asked, slopping out her soup as she sat down. 'Where's Bardot?'

'Out as usual,' Miss Phipps said. 'See her supper is kept.'

'But she swore she'd come out with me tonight! I hurried home specially! What a cow she is!'

Sybil asked me where I worked, and Miss Phipps said I was waiting for the hanging and I wasn't at work. Sybil asked me if I'd got any records. Miss Phipps said my luggage hadn't arrived.

'Oh I get it,' Sybil said. 'She's deaf and dumb, poor cow!'

After supper, the girls cleared the tables and some washed up, crooning, laughing, horseplaying all the while, and others swept the dining-room and laid the tables for breakfast. I felt like a spare part, but I didn't go back upstairs until Sybil said:

'Hi! Wotsername . . . Kathleen! I want you!'

Sybil almost vaulted the staircase. I went slowly, feeling very weak.

'You expecting a baby?' Sybil asked.

'No.'

Sybil laughed. 'I hope you kept your fingers crossed. Anyone who can say "no" like that must have been inside somewhere—convent or borstal or some such heaven. . . .'

When we reached our room, Sybil grumbled about that cow Bardot.

'She makes me sick! Selfish! Bloody hell, we're all selfish, but we do sometimes keep a promise! Did she say where she'd gone?'

'She said I was to tell you she'd got a date, a new one, the best ever, and she won't do anything you haven't done.'

'She'd have a job!' Sybil lay on her bed, cursing. 'I'll go crackers if I stay here . . . What about you? Where are you going?'

'Nowhere. I've been ill. I'm a bit tired. . . .'

'I say! What about you and me stepping out? You won't frighten the men off like some of the girls in this dump.'

She took it for granted I would go. I was so tired, and yet I remembered the loneliness after Bardot had gone.

Sybil made her face up, powdered under her arms, put a clean jumper on.

'How's that? I say! You need some colour, Lady . . . Here, try this! It's Bardot's but that cow pinches everything of everybody else's she can lay hands on, so why not?'

Miss Phipps came in.

'You're not going out, Kathleen?'

'For crying out loud, Phippsey! She doesn't wear napkins!'

'But she's been very ill.'

'She'll be very ill if she stays in this dump with everybody else out. We're only going to the flicks.'

'Don't be late, then,' Miss Phipps said.

'The girls here are never late, Phippsey! I've heard you tell no end of welfare officers that.'

Miss Phipps brushed my collar for me.

'Perhaps you might as well die doing too much as too little . . . Take things quietly, and come home, whatever the hour.'

SYBIL was very conscious of the boys and men we passed.

'I say!' 'OO-er, excuse me!' 'I've seen better than him crawling out of cheese!'

She got mad with me because I didn't respond, said if I thought I was on the way to an Irish wake, she'd say goodbye. I said I was sorry, I was tired. She said she reckoned I was in the family way, I looked peaky and just like poor Molly did when she caught her packet.

I tried to laugh when she did her 'Oo-ers!' I tried not to mind when she bumped into me, pretending to dodge a couple of soldiers. But in the end, I was crying.

'I'm sorry! I've got to go back! I feel so ill!'

She seemed triumphant:

'Didn't I tell you? You've got a baby! You're just the type. You feel sick, I expect?'

She studied me until two men came up to us:

'Don't make the poor kid cry!' shouted one.

'What's the matter, Sweetie?' the other man asked, putting his arm round me.

Sybil was all over the men. She said she didn't speak to

strange men, not 'arf she didn't . . . I thought, if I don't run away, I'll have to go with them, and I can't. . . .

I said : 'I'm going back now.'

One man said : 'I'll come with you.'

Sybil said : 'I shouldn't if I was you. You might get blamed for it.'

I got on a bus while it was still going.

'If you wanna commit suicide, throw yourself in the river, Miss,' the conductor said.

I sank in the seat, happy.

'Fares, please. . . .'

'I want to get to Chelsea. . . .'

'Change at Pimlico Road. . . .'

The streets slipped by. People shoved me, trod on my feet, thrust money past my nose. But I was happy. I was resting as I hadn't seemed to rest for weeks, sinking right into the seat, going unresisting where I was taken, not caring if I ever arrived. The hostel, Miss Phipps, Bardot and Sylvia were in my distant past, finished with . . . I was going to change at Pimlico Road where I had walked with Johnny, ridden with Johnny. It was like going home ! I would see the shops I knew, the faces I had seen before, and if I turned down Lawton Street, I would come to the Caff, and Merle and Susan and Larry Pearce and Norman and Steve . . . And I had got the money to buy myself some noise, and it would go on until it was the only thing and I was nothing. I dreamed of the Caff as the streets sped by. Of course Johnny was there. He was the noise. He was the laughter. He was the sizzling of the fat in the pan. He was the spurting of boiling water and the ringing of the till.

'Hi ! Didn't you want Pimlico Road ? Well, look slippery then. I want my supper too !'

It all felt different. It was wider, and the buildings were taller, and I was alone in a strange land. Johnny *was* dead. Johnny had always been dead. We hadn't wandered this street together. I hurried on, not remembering I was tired, not looking now for familiar faces.

I came to the Caff. There was a Norton outside. That must be Johnny's . . . I rushed inside, and the noise that met me was hell, and the air was blue, and nobody saw that I had come. I leaned on the counter and sobbed my heart out, because I was so happy. I was so much a part of the Caff that nobody noticed when I came in and nobody cared that I sobbed. You *could* sob there and be left alone. That was the whole point of it.

Bill leaned over.

'Tea?'

He didn't wait for me to answer. He pushed the tea at me, nodded his head. 'Yes,' he said, 'that's life, ain't it? All tangos and tears, tangos and tears. Meself, I've never been much good at either.'

The juke stopped suddenly and I felt naked, and people began to remember me. They were all there, just as I had left them, with a few strangers added.

Merle looked up, saw me, came over :

'Oh, no !' she screamed.

'Not you again !' Susan shrieked.

And they hugged me and I cried and they cried.

'Gas ovens this way !' someone shouted.

And then the juke started up, and Merle and Susan began dancing.

Larry Pearce came in just then.

'Kathy! Oh Kathy! I thought . . . No, come and sit down !'

'I'd rather dance,' I said, still sobbing.

Larry shrugged his shoulders. He shoved aside some tables. He caught my hand and twirled me. And I wasn't dancing with Larry. I was dancing with Johnny, and my heart was leaping and the rhythm wouldn't let my feet stay still. The last mad whirling made me so dizzy I collapsed in Larry's arms. He laughed.

'I hope you'll do that some more,' he said.

We sat in a corner, and Larry bought me a coke. He smoked

and watched the others dancing, and every so often he stared at me as if he wasn't quite sure I was there.

'See my Norton outside?' he asked. 'That was Johnny's . . . Perhaps you knew?'

Norman came over and pointed to Merle and Susan dancing.

'Couple of Lesbians,' he said. 'I told them they were Lesbians, and they said they were only marking time until the right man came along.'

Bill joined us.

'I'm unhappy about Johnny,' he said.

Larry pushed him away: 'You don't have to be.'

'I guessed you were crying for him just now,' Bill said to me.

'Drop dead, Bill!' Larry said. 'Can't you see she's been ill? She's taken enough!'

It was all so much on Bill's mind that he seemed unable to stop though he could see Larry was getting angry.

'Someone told me I'd have to go to the inquest,' Bill complained. 'I don't want to. What's it got to do with me? I liked the Norton boy. We all did. . . .' Larry shoved him away again. 'It's not good for business, for one thing. . . .'

'Go and get a couple of cokes. You can talk about inquests and anything else you bloody well like when we're gone.'

Larry bought coke after coke, and he put so much money in the juke that evening that he had nearly paid for it by the time the crowd began thinning. He knew I needed noise. He knew it helped me if I couldn't hear what people were saying to me. He knew I didn't want to talk to Bill. Each time Bill came back to say something about Johnny, Larry pushed him away, sent him for more cokes, for cigarettes, for change.

And after a while, it wasn't Larry who was sitting there protecting me. Larry was Mum with her head held high again, and she was fond of me and didn't care what I'd done because her love for me couldn't be shaken. Then Larry was Dad. I had never seen Larry afraid before, but now he was. His eyes kept seeking mine. His hand wanted to close over mine but he was

afraid, and he became Dad, and I found myself talking to him as Dad.

'You're afraid of Mum, aren't you? So am I. But I'm afraid because I want her love. Is that your fear too? Why do we want her love so much that it kills us if we don't have it?'

And Larry was Dad. He said :

'Kathy! Kathy!'

And then he was Johnny, and that made me cry. The juke went on thumping and screaming; Merle and Norman danced violently, hating each other I could feel. I wanted to ask Larry why they danced together if they hated each other, why they hated each other anyway; but it wasn't Larry there. It was Johnny. So I cried.

'I'll keep her for you, Johnny,' I said aloud. 'I'll keep the white crash helmet for her. I'll tell her you bought it for her. I'll tell her when she's old enough what your Mum believes—that you died trying to save me. And that's more true than anyone knows, except Larry. He'd know why you died. He'd know we were wrong and yet we were right: and that they were right and yet they were wrong.' 'Johnny!' I shouted above the noise, looking at Larry: 'I loved you at the end. I expect I loved you at the beginning, but it got mixed up with the things we did, with what Mum calls "filth", and . . . I didn't understand, Johnny. I do now. So if I say at the inquest that I never set eyes on you before you were in the water, you won't think I'm denying you, will you? I could never tell them about us. At least, I could tell them, but only Larry would believe . . . Bill might. Bill called you "The Norton Boy". Bill loved you, so did Larry, so did I, so did your father and your mother and your uncle and . . . And I guess our baby will love you when she grows up. I'll teach her to say "Daddy!" That's the first word she'll say . . . And I'll say you've gone a long way away, but you loved her, and . . . Johnny! What's her name? You went before you gave her a name, didn't you, Johnny? And I don't deserve to give her a name. I called her a bastard when she hurt me, but. . . .'

'Say it all, Kathy . . . Say what you like,' Larry said softly in a moment of lull. 'I can't hear, nobody can. . . .'

'They all loved you, Johnny . . . and I loved you for all of them, and I didn't know it . . . Did you love me? I don't know the answer to that. I don't truly. Larry loves me. I know that. Dad loves me, but you . . . ? I wish I knew. I wish I knew what it means, this love that's wrong mostly . . . It's even wrong to love Dad the way I do. Mum says it's unhealthy, and Mum knows.'

Larry let me cry. The juke was so loud, I could sob and scream :

'I can't ! I can't !' and nobody asked me what I meant which was good, because I didn't know.

'Kathy !' Larry said.

Everybody was going :

'See ya !'

'Bye !'

'Flippin' night always ends too soon !'

'Feel like a ride, and I don't mean come and watch my telly !'

Larry gave me his handkerchief when they had all gone and Bill was leaning on the urn. Bill was afraid now, afraid of Larry, afraid to come over to us.

'A ride's an idea, Kathy,' Larry said.

'Where to ?'

'Anywhere . . . My home, if you like. My Mum will see at once what you need. She knows all about you . . . and me . . . and. . . .'

'No !'

'O.K. Just a ride. You say when.'

We roared along Pimlico Road, and it wasn't any different from the road Johnny and I had known. I was worn out at first, and then I grew excited and the tiredness dropped from me. We must have reached Chelsea, because soon I recognized the hospital they had taken me to after the drowning.

'Stop !' I screamed.

Larry went on. I thought he hadn't heard me. We whizzed



past Battersea Bridge, past the landing stage. I beat on Larry's back. He stopped just at the point where the white sea seemed to begin.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I had forgotten. It was here, wasn't it . . . ? I'll take you back. Hold tight.'

I said : 'No ! Larry ! Stop !'

And when he had stopped and stood looking at me, I knew he was Johnny again; because he didn't want to stop there, but he had had to because he was afraid of me.

'I want to walk by myself,' I said.

I wanted him to say : 'I won't let you !' But he didn't. He was afraid. He watched me go to the landing stage. I couldn't see him watching me, but I could feel his eyes boring into the back of me. I could almost feel his fear spreading towards me like a thick cloud. I knew suddenly that he couldn't swim. In that was his fear.

I forgot Larry. I looked down into the water, into the monotonous heaving black of it. Johnny was there, under the black, not visible, yet wherever I looked I saw him. And the queer thing was, I had no desire to join him. I had so often in my mind's eye seen just this stretch of water, felt eased because I knew I could join him at any time. And now I was seeing him as Johnny, as someone apart from me, someone dead here and alive elsewhere. It was to the elsewhere I was drawn not to the here.

Larry came to my side, breathless although only a few yards had separated us :

'You wouldn't do anything silly, Kathy?'

We went to the self-same spot where Johnny and I had been so happy sad; and we sat overlooking the houseboat, with our legs dangling over a high tide. I listened to the slap of the water, and looked down to catch a glimpse of stars. And I felt unhappy because I felt no pain for Johnny, no need of Johnny. That must surely be wrong? But Larry was there, smoking silently, and Larry was Johnny so I couldn't mourn. It was like being

told that nothing ended. I had been right to feel Johnny wasn't dead.

'Yes,' Larry said, answering his own thoughts. 'Live and let live . . . Live and let die. Where's the difference? They can think me a queer if they like, but I felt for Johnny like I feel for you, and at rock bottom there's no difference. I can't explain it, but it has always been that way. That's why I could give Johnny the money to take you out. That's why I could keep away from you once Johnny had claimed you. That's why I could keep away from the hospital, both times, this last because that was what Johnny would have wanted.'

When he talked of Johnny, as if he was separate, I knew Johnny was dead, and I got sick, remembering the feel of the water above me as we struggled.

'I feel sick,' I said.

He said : 'Don't mind me. Bring it all up. I'll hold your head. That helps, doesn't it?'

It wasn't only my stomach I brought up. I heaved up my heart, and I told Larry about Johnny, and all the hurt I had had, and the fears, and the questions, and my mother and dad, and Teddy Dillon, and what Johnny's Uncle George had asked me to say at the inquest. I thought Larry was asleep, he was so quiet. He didn't even put on another cigarette.

He pointed to the water.

'You've got some guts to dive into that.'

When there was nothing more to say, I felt cold. He must have seen me shiver. He got up stiffly and pulled me up beside him.

'Come on. We'll get.'

'I've got nowhere to get,' I said.

He said : 'You've got that hostel, and that's where I'm taking you to.'

I was unwilling to go, so we leaned on the parapet, our elbows touching; and suddenly I fell against Larry's shoulders, and he put his arm about me, and I was glad.

'This is mean to Johnny, isn't it?' I said.

He shrugged his shoulders.

'I don't know. I don't feel so. I feel that once we were three, and now we're two, and that's it.'

I snuggled close, happy.

'Tell me what to do, Larry.'

'About what?'

'Everything . . . The inquest for one thing.'

'I don't like offering you advice, because the advice I gave Johnny worked out wrong. He was dead scared over the money he nicked, and I told him to tell his father. I'd have done better to leave him alone. He would have been standing here now, standing where I'm standing. No, don't ask me for advice.'

He didn't say any more. He took my arm and walked me to the Norton and buttoned up my coat for me, and turned my face up to his and said he was sorry but he felt terribly happy. He said one side of him had envied Johnny, and he envied him now—not for being dead, of course; but in Johnny's shoes he wouldn't be dead. He would stand with me against a wall and let them fire at him. And so long as they didn't kill us, he wouldn't care, because he would know that the day would dawn when he could claim me and the baby. . . .

He stopped abruptly, and said :

'I'd better take you back.'

He didn't go fast, and I was glad. I held him round the waist, and rested my cheek against his back and felt protected. I didn't want to tease him. I wanted only to be close, to be protected, to be understood, to be made to feel I was a good girl even though I was a bad girl.

We stopped outside Amberley House, and we went up the steps into the porch and Larry leaned against a pillar and pulled me to him. He just kept me leaning there, and I felt warm, and all the fight had gone out of me and I was ready to do anything he said.

'You never know, do you?' he whispered. 'I was utterly browned off tonight, and you came in and I knew I would never be browned off again . . . I mean that. I saw you cry,

and I couldn't do anything because it mattered. And I had to make myself take your hand and dance. I wanted to do so much, that I didn't want to, if you get me. I know you've still got your troubles. I know there's the inquest, and the Council to please, and your parents, and Johnny's parents . . . But none of these are as big as what I feel for you. All I want is for you to feel that way for me.'

He began to kiss my hair, and I was wanting him to go on. But he suddenly leaned away from the post and said :

'Time to say goodnight.' And he rang the bell.

Miss Phipps came to the door in her dressing-gown :

'Kathleen !' she said. 'This is no time for a sick girl to come in. Still, I'm glad you've come back . . . Thanks for bringing her.'

'Bye, Kathy . . . I'll be seeing you, won't I? Shall we say seven o'clock tomorrow night? I'll fetch you.'

Miss Phipps poured me out a mug of hot milk from a thermos jug and sent me up to bed. Sybil was at the dressing table, doing up her hair.

'You're a fine friend, I must say, leaving me with those two fellows! I mean, I can manage any one man any time . . . But two . . . Anyway, they weren't much cop, wanted a lot for a little. I ditched them in the flicks, saw all I wanted to see, went to be a lady and ran all the way home like a good little girl.'

She covered her head with rollers and then massaged her face.

'Where did you go?'

'To see some friends.'

'I bet you mean the father of your cheeild, don't you. Keeping up the good work? I'm all in favour.'

We were both in bed and she paused in the act of putting out the light :

'I mean, seriously, you don't look well. I wouldn't mind betting you're pregnant . . . And, talking of being pregnant, where's Bardot?'

I didn't feel at all strange in the room. I felt happy. Someone had put a hot water bottle in my bed, and in cuddling it I knew a sudden fierce joy.

The last thing I remember was when Sybil said :

'Have you thought of a name for your cheeild?'

And I said :

'No . . . But I will.'

THE END























